www.choice.com.au AUGUST 2005

CHOICE

Independent information for smart consumers

Tests

DVD RECORDERS

GAS COOKTOPS

HAIR STRAIGHTENERS

GLUCOSAMINE

HEY PRESTO, ESPRESSO!

Automatic espresso makers on test

LADDERS

Which ones are safe?

PET CARE

Your options for pet care when you go away

COMING SOON ...

Moisturisers with sunscreen

Can you get sun protection in a moisturiser that still feels good on your face?

Crackers

Which ones are better for you?

Kids' bike helmets

Do some offer more protection than others?

Subscribe to CHOICE

PERSONAL SUBSCRIPTIONS
One year $69, two years $128.
COMPANIES/INSTITUTIONS
One year $110, two years $210.
For subscription and renewal enquiries only, call 1800 069 552.

CONTACT US

WRITE to us at CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204.
PHONE us on (02) 9577 3399.
FAX us on (02) 9577 3377.
EMAIL us at ausconsumer@choice.com.au

Cost versus quality

Peter Kell, CEO

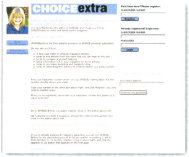
Is a higher price a good guide to a better-quality product? This is supposed to be the way markets work, and life would certainly be simpler if there was a straightforward link between quality and cost. But CHOICE readers know that price, unfortunately, is an unreliable guide to the quality of many products we buy. When CHOICE puts products or services to the test we find that paying more can deliver less, and too often overpriced 'bells and whistles' take the place of real quality.

This month's cover story on automatic (and expensive) espresso machines (page 9) is a case in point. None of these make better coffee than the Best Buy from last year's test of cheap manual machines (see CHOICE, August 2004), according to our expert coffee tasters. The cheapie also rated equal best for frothing milk. So you could save hundreds of dollars *and* get better taste and texture in your coffee if you forgo the small advantage in convenience that comes with an expensive automatic.

Life would also be simpler if suppliers told you upfront the real cost of products and services. You may recall we recently welcomed the Treasurer's announcement that the Federal Government would introduce 'truth-in-pricing' laws (CHOICE, June 2004). We've now found that some business interests are already fighting against this reform. Truth-in-pricing would require suppliers to give you a single all-inclusive price rather than a low figure with additional charges and taxes hidden in the small print. We'll be going into bat for you with the aim of making sure the government keeps its promise on this issue. It's another good example of the way CHOICE works to ensure you get honest information about the goods and services you buy.

FOR MEMBERS ONLY

www.CHOICEextra.com.au



The free website exclusive to CHOICE magazine personal subscribers, with a four-year index and links to many articles online.

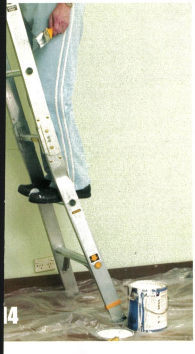
Look out for the symbol in magazine articles — it indicates there's extra info on CHOICEextra. This month you'll find additional information on pet care services that we couldn't fit into CHOICE.

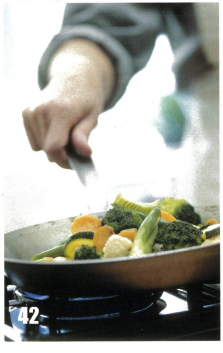
To use this free website you'll need to log in with your subscriber number, which is the number directly above your name on the mailing label that comes with the magazine.

CHOICE best value SHOPPER

All you need is the model name and number you want to buy, the price you want to beat, and your CHOICE subscriber number (from the mailing label with the magazine). CHOICE Shopper is available to personal subscribers only.

Call 1300 360 655





CONTENTS

August 2005

COVER STORY

9 **Espresso machines**
We tested nine expensive automatic models, and found top dollar doesn't equal top taste.
Photo: Austral Images

REPORTS

20 **Low-carb foods**
Low-carbohydrate options aren't necessarily the healthier option you might think.

27 **Outsourced pet care**
Holiday time for you may not mean a holiday for your pet — a guide to choosing pet boarding facilities and in-home care.

40 **Is duty-free worthwhile?**
Duty-free shopping isn't what it used to be but you may still find a good deal.

TESTS

14 **Ladders: ups and downs**
Only one multipurpose ladder passed all our tests.

24 **Ease your knees**
Glucosamine: is your daily dose enough to do you any good?

32 **Hair straighteners**
Ten trialists rated 13 models priced from $30 to $300.

36 **DVD recorders**
Ten good reasons to finally upgrade your VHS recorder.

42 **Gas cooktops**
The results from our test of stainless steel, extra-wide, five-burner models.

REGULARS

4 CHOICE Cuts
7 Your Letters
8 Food Bites: Mercury in fish ... again; the great milk debate.
46 Hip Pocket: Income protection insurance; super tips for women.
47 Consumer Bookshelf
49 Recalls and bans
51 CHOICE Index: September 2004 to August 2005
52 The Hard Word

CONGRATS

Congratulations to Mr and Mrs Lopez of Boambee, NSW, the winners of our June label carrier promotion. They've won a Krups Nespresso 893 machine.

Prescription drugs and safety

It's estimated around 140,000 people in this country end up hospitalised every year after taking the incorrect medicine or dosage. One of the culprits behind this situation is confusing packaging and labelling.

Examples of this are easy to find:

- Different drugs with similar-sounding names, such as a medication for diabetes with a similar name to an antidepressant, making the two easy to confuse.
- Chemical ('generic') names not listed on dispensing labels, leading to the risk of doubling up on different brands of the same medicine.
- Dosage and strengths not displayed prominently.
- Inadequate space for pharmacists' labels, like the potentially toxic blood-thinning drug in a bottle too small to put a label on.
- Batch numbers and expiry dates imprinted so faintly on boxes they're illegible.

Pharmacists, doctors and others have long been concerned about packaging, labelling and safety, with stakeholders coming together to discuss the issues in May this year at the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia's Packaging, Labelling and Marketing of Medicines Industry Symposium.

Vice President of PSA (Victoria) John Jackson advises consumers not to leave the pharmacy without asking exactly how to use their medication. Also — to keep your costs down — ask its generic name and whether a cheaper generic brand of the drug prescribed is available. In addition:

- Keep a list of all your medicines and show this to your GP and any other healthcare professionals you consult.
- Ensure you understand how the drugs work by asking about your condition and treatment plan.
- Ask your pharmacist for a copy of the relevant Consumer Medicine Information leaflet, which contains information about your medicine and how to use it. One is available for all prescription drugs.

GENE ROSS

Digital photo kiosks on trial

Digital photo kiosks allow you to preview and edit your digital images in-store before they're printed. CHOICE's sister publication, *Computer* CHOICE, surveyed more than 50 photo kiosks around Australia to investigate the level of quality you can expect and how much you'll pay.

Trialists visited kiosks to order and print images from a CD. The quality of each print received was rated by an expert panel and costs were compared to see if there was any correlation between price and quality.

Prints ordered through a digital kiosk will either be processed by the minilab's professional printer using traditional silver halide paper, or produced from the kiosk on the spot using an inkjet printer or dye-sublimation printer, where layers of dye are added to the paper one at a time.

The results were variable. *Computer* CHOICE found that the printing method didn't seem to greatly affect the quality of the print received. None of the kiosks visited produced a full set of good prints.

About 30% of the prints received were rated 'poor' by the panel of experts. The remainder were mostly found to be acceptable, with some prints of noticeably better quality. Prints rated 'poor' had an obvious fault such as an easily discernible colour cast or poor exposure.

There were large variations in price across brands and states. Kiosks located within Big W stores charged as little as 20 cents per print, while one independent minilab charged $1.50. But price isn't a sure indicator of quality. *Computer* CHOICE reported poor prints across all price brackets and the most expensive prints weren't necessarily the best quality. Of the 15 most expensive kiosks surveyed, 30% of their prints were rated 'poor' and only 9% 'good'.

The best advice is to shop around. If prints aren't to the standard you'd expect, return to the retailer and ask for them to be reprinted. If a store's not willing to oblige, go elsewhere. Support the outlets that offer good quality at a reasonable price.

To subscribe to *Computer* CHOICE phone 1800 069 552 toll-free or go to www.choice.com.au/magazines.

GENE ROSS

A solution to a sticky problem?

It's so frustrating trying to remove ugly stickers and labels from things, only to leave an even uglier sticky, papery mess behind. Good old eucalyptus oil is often called upon to finish the job, but it doesn't always do the trick.

OOMPH Glue Remover is a new citrus-based cleaning product that claims to remove sticky residues, labels and stickers, tape, Blu-Tak and various waxy or greasy marks (lipstick, crayons, tar and soap scum). We were keen to see if it lived up to its claims, and how it compared with **ORANGE POWER Sticky Spot & Goo Dissolver** (another citrus-based product with similar claims), eucalyptus oil and plain old warm water and detergent.

We tested their power at removing stickers and labels from enamel, glass, plastic, metal, wood, a DVD cover and a CD cover, and lipstick from a cotton t-shirt. **OOMPH** was best overall, and successfully removed all stickers and stickiness with very little effort. However, it did discolour the CD cover (made it opaque). **ORANGE POWER** was almost as good, though it took more effort and also damaged the CD cover at full strength (when diluted, it required more effort, but didn't damage it). Both products leave an oily residue that you need to rinse or wipe off with warm soapy water.

The eucalyptus oil did a reasonable job, though it took more effort than the two citrus-based products and can still damage plastics; warm water and detergent was the least successful. None of the four products completely removed the lipstick stain from the t-shirt.

If you often have sticky problems, it might be worth keeping some **OOMPH** or **ORANGE POWER** on hand. However, make sure you read the instructions carefully. Because of their potential to damage surfaces, we repeat the packaging warnings to test the products on an inconspicuous area first. You can check their websites for more usage information: www.pascoes.com.au and www.orangepower.com.au.

UPDATE: STROLLER RECALL

JOGGER STROLLERS

CHOICE, June 2005

MOUNTAIN BUGGY has recalled 2005 **Urban** single strollers (model 1204-002, serial numbers 000000-003342) and 2005 **Urban** double strollers (model 2204-002, serial numbers 000000-006957).

A weakness in the handle mechanism may result in the handle breaking under heavy load, such as when pulling the stroller up stairs. The sample we tested didn't exhibit this problem.

If you have one of the listed models, contact Mountain Buggy on (03) 9570 2833 for details on how to get the stroller repaired.

Action against wine medal mockery

If your knowledge of wine is patchy and you want to avoid picking a dud, it might seem a safe bet to choose a bottle that shows a string of shiny medals — after all, if it won a show award, it's got to have some merit. But bottlers are using our go-for-gold mentality to their advantage, slapping all kinds of gold and silver discs onto the sides of bottles to lure us in, and what appears to be a gong may just be fool's gold.

A quick look in bottle shops reveals some wines boasting 'medals' that could be confused with legitimate wine show awards. For example, **McGUIGAN'S Black Label** carries three gold discs, one marking it as 'Winery of the Year' (as opined by *Wine Estate* magazine). **DE BORTOLI** and **GRANT BURGE** both display medallions celebrating a milestone in their number of years in winemaking.

The Winemakers' Federation of Australia (WFA) has introduced a new code of practice to combat the indiscriminate use of gold, silver and bronze discs — it's due to come into force for all wine produced from the 2005 vintage.

In order to avoid misleading consumers, a wine can only display medals when it's received an award from a recognised show. Any other awards or promotions on wine labels must be of a different shape and/or colour.

The WFA also wants wine shows to make compliance with the code of practice a prerequisite for competition entry by producers.

While the code of practice doesn't guarantee that the arbitrary use of gold, silver and bronze discs won't continue, it's a step in the right direction in helping consumers choose genuinely top tipples.

It's a scam!

If all the promises that come our way were true, we could easily make big money working from home, turn a small investment into a huge money spinner or lose lots of weight without moving a muscle. But when something sounds too good to be true, it usually is.

The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) has put together a lot of information about scams. This *CHOICE Cut* is a summary of the most important points — for more details, check out the ACCC website (www.accc.gov.au).

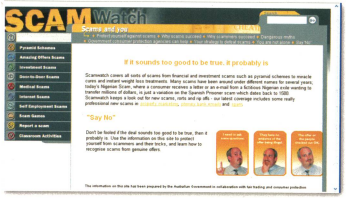
The most common scams these days are pyramid schemes and 'work from home for megabucks' scams, but they're by no means the only ones. There are chain letters promising you huge profits, lottery scams informing you of an exciting 'win', and emails advising you of an unclaimed inheritance (as in the well-known Nigerian scam letter). All of them, of course, want you to pay a 'fee' first or disclose your bank account details, or both.

While scam letters are still sent by post or fax, increasingly they arrive via unsolicited email (spam), clogging up our mailboxes or, worse, invading and infecting our computers (and nowadays even our mobile phones) with viruses or Trojans.

RECOGNISING A SCAM

It's probably a scam if it sounds too good to be true, or if there's:

- A promise of instant wealth, a miracle cure, perfect body or exciting online entertainment.
- An abundance of exclamation marks !!! and CAPITALS!!!
- A statement assuring you it's "not a pyramid-selling scheme or scam".
- A demand for upfront payment for whatever is offered.
- No company street address, just a post office box number.
- A dead link on a website to the page with terms and conditions, or links to pages that don't seem to belong to the site.


SCAM Watch
Scams and you
Pyramid Schemes
Amazing Offers Scams
Investment Scams
Door-to-Door Scams
Medical Scams
Internet Scams
Self Employment Scams
Scam Games
Report a scam
Classroom Activities
If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is
Scamwatch covers all sorts of scams from financial and investment scams such as pyramid schemes to miracle cures and instant weight loss treatments. Many scams have been around under different names for several years; today's Nigerian Scam, where a consumer receives a letter or an e-mail from a fictitious Nigerian exile wanting to transfer millions of dollars, is just a variation on the Spanish Prisoner scam which dates back to 1588.
Scamwatch keeps a look out for new scams, rorts and rip offs - our latest coverage includes some really professional new scams in
and
"Say No"
Don't be fooled if the deal sounds too good to be true, then it probably is. Use the information on this site to protect yourself from scammers and their tricks, and learn how to recognise scams from genuine offers.
The information on this site has been prepared by the Australian Government in collaboration with fair trading and consumer protection

PROTECTING YOURSELF

Unless you know who you're dealing with, or you've checked with someone who knows:

- Don't disclose personal or financial details when asked by email or phone.
- Don't pay money upfront.
- Don't answer spam, and use an up-to-date virus checker and firewall, especially if you have a broadband connection.
- Don't log onto a bank's website through a link or web address you receive in an email.

REPORTING SCAMS AND SPAM

- Filling in a complaints page at the Slam-a-Cyberscam webpage at www.accc.gov.au (follow the internet shopping link) helps authorities monitor scams.
- You can also report a general scam to your state office of fair trading — the www.scamwatch.gov.au website has links to them — and a financial scam to the Australian Securities and Investments Commission at www.fido.asic.gov.au.
- If you aren't online, phone the ACCC Infocentre on 1300 302 502 or the ASIC Infoline on 1300 300 630.
- To report spam, contact the Australian Communications Authority on www.spam.aca.gov.au.

WORLD CONSUMER SNAPSHOT

STUNNING OUTFIT

Ireland's *Consumer Choice* magazine reports on the 'no-contact jacket', developed by DuPont. "It looks like an ordinary and fashionable jacket but an inner layer of conductive fibre carries a low-amp charge with the capability to deliver an 80,000 V electric (non-fatal) shock to any would-be assailant," reports the magazine. The jacket has an inner rubber lining and an outer layer of waterproof nylon, which protect the wearer from shocks.

SWITCH OFF

A potentially popular high-tech gadget attracted the attention of *Which?* magazine in the UK. The keyring-sized TV-B-Gone switches off virtually any TV by aping the signals of 2000 different makes of remote control. "Peace on earth costs just £9 from www.tvbgone.com," reports the magazine.

WHEN THE SUN AIN'T SHINING ...

It seems some Europeans in colder countries would rather risk their health and future good looks than face the world with a naturally pale complexion. Even those who don't want to leave the house can now get a tan using a home tanning unit for the face or torso. Austria's *Konsument* magazine tested a few and reports that they're quite affordable and convenient but not without risk. As you'd expect, frequent use can age the skin prematurely and increase the risk of skin disease, including skin cancer.

Germans, too, seem to be interested in these machines. Ads would often have you believe they even boost your immune system, but that's far from proven, points out *Test* magazine. On the contrary, frequent UV radiation can weaken the immune system, says *Test*. And a home tanning unit will neither help with vitamin D production nor combat winter depression.

yourletters

Charging overseas? Be prepared

I want to warn consumers about a potential problem with using a mobile phone in the US. After reading your article on mobile phones (CHOICE Jan/Feb 2005) I bought a tri-band **NOKIA** 3120 especially for use on a trip to the US because I needed to keep in contact with a sick family member (I already have a dual-band phone). I rang **NOKIA** three times to check this model was suitable for use in the US. I then paid $300 to set up global roaming with Telstra and thought I'd covered everything.

However, when I arrived overseas I discovered its charger is designed only for a 240 volt power source — but US mains power is 110 volts. I asked a mobile phone retailer whether I could try charging my phone, and was told it would burn out. I tried phoning the **NOKIA** office in the US, but couldn't get a straight answer out of them. The places I visited were small towns, and I couldn't find a charger anywhere.

As I was unwilling to risk damaging the phone by trying to charge it, I couldn't use the phone after the original charge ran out — although I was able to charge it again using a friend's car charger towards the end of the trip. It was an extremely frustrating situation.

Barry Arnold
Epping, NSW

It seems incongruous to provide only a 240 volt charger for a tri-band phone that's designed to be used in the US. Many phones come with multi-voltage chargers that accept a range of voltages from 100-240 V, so all you need is a pin/plug adaptor. ***NOKIA*** *sells a multi-voltage travel charger suitable for the 3120 for less than $20 — but you may need to think about that before leaving home, especially if you're going to places unlikely to retail a large range of mobile phone accessories.*

The question is, what would have happened if Barry had tried to charge his phone using the 110 V power source and 240 V charger? Would it have permanently damaged his phone, as the retailer suggested? Could it have worked at all?

NOKIA *says that it's unlikely the phone would have suffered any damage, as they have inbuilt safeguards. However, it's also unlikely to have charged the phone:* ***NOKIA*** *points out mobile phone batteries need a certain threshold of voltage before they charge. Barry's charger would be expecting 240 V, and 110 V wouldn't be enough to successfully charge the phone.*

If you're planning to use your phone overseas, check your charger can handle the mains power voltage of the countries you're visiting — if not, it's probably best to buy a suitable charger before you go. And don't forget your pin/plug adaptors.

Comprehensive con

I've comprehensively insured my car with the same high-profile insurer for the last seven years, with full no-claim bonuses throughout. The annual premiums haven't changed much over that time, although the insured value has more than halved. I suppose the increasing cost of repairing damage has offset the lower potential write-off value.

However, it was the marketing card-trick in this year's renewal that caught my eye. A glossy insert offered me the option of choosing my own repairer, at an additional cost of $40 per year.

If I wasn't alert — and cynical — I'd have thought what good people they were to offer me this. However, I decided to look deeper, and discovered that I've *always* had this freedom of choice in my policy — but from 2005 onwards, the choice was being removed. However, I could pay to get it back.

So the premiums haven't stayed constant after all — I'm paying the same for less.

Alistair Powell
Highbury, SA

THUMBS UP!

■ We hear so much bad press about banks, it's nice to get a good story now and then, and Greg Rutter gives a Thumbs Up to **Suncorp Metway**.

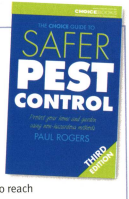
He'd mistakenly overdrawn his cheque account, and was charged a $30 fee. He contacted them, pointing out he was pretty sure he'd applied for their automatic sweep facility, where funds are drawn from a healthy account to correct the imbalance. Their records showed he hadn't applied — but they waived the fee anyway.

■ A clean-shaven and grateful Ian Laird thanks **REMINGTON** for not only fixing his shaver free of charge, but taking the time and trouble to explain what he was doing wrong and how to rectify the problem.

LETTER OF THE MONTH

We want to hear from you — your experiences help our research and often let other readers know about scams and rip-offs. Positive outcomes you've had to a complaint you took to a manufacturer, retailer, importer or tradesperson interest us, too. Address these letters to *Thumbs Up* at the address on page 2.

To thank you for writing to us, *Your Letters* awards a prize of a CHOICE book to the 'Letter of the month'. This month's winner, Barry Arnold of Epping, NSW, receives *The CHOICE Guide to Safer Pest Control*, or any other book of his choice from Consumer Bookshelf, pages 47 to 48.



We're sorry we don't have the resources to answer all your letters personally, and in the magazine we may edit them or print only an extract. See page 2 for how to reach

The great milk debate

Choosing a carton of milk isn't a simple task these days — full fat, low fat, high calcium, omega-3, and now A1 or A2 ...

So what are A1 and A2? Milk contains many proteins, one being beta-casein. A1 and A2 are types of beta-casein. Milk sourced from different breeds of cattle contains varying proportions of A1 and A2 beta-casein. A2 milk comes from cattle breeds that produce milk higher in A2 beta-casein. Milk produced in Australia and New Zealand is normally a mix of A1 and A2 milks.

In the past few years a New Zealand company, the A2 Corporation, has been promoting the benefits of A2 milk. Meanwhile, stories claiming milk high in A1 protein can trigger autism, schizophrenia, diabetes and heart disease have also been doing the media rounds.

The New Zealand Food Safety Authority recently commissioned a report to look into these claims, and found no substantial evidence to suggest that A2 milk has any significant benefit over A1 milk. Food Standards Australia New Zealand has also advised that, based on the available information, it won't be making any changes to recommendations about drinking milk. It recommends that "milk should continue to be regarded as a safe and nutritious component of the diet for most people".

GENE ROSS

FOOD ACIDS — WHAT ARE THEY?

Food acids are used to maintain a level of acidity in a food, and also for **inhibiting microbial growth**. Common ones include acetic acid or vinegar, and citric acid, which is also found in citrus fruit.

RF

Mercury in fish ... again

In the past few years we've passed on warnings from health authorities about watching our consumption of certain species of fish, due to the risk of mercury poisoning. The warning is especially targeted at pregnant women, women considering pregnancy and young children, and it may have worked too well. A recent survey by the NSW Food Authority has found that some women are avoiding fish altogether, despite its benefits.

Fish is a valuable source of many nutrients, especially for pregnant women and a growing baby. It's a good source of omega-3 polyunsaturated fat, which is vital for the development of a baby's central nervous system, protein, iodine and Vitamin B12.

Once again it's a matter of balance. Fish that have lower mercury levels and are also high in omega-3 fatty acids, such as Atlantic salmon, mackerel and silver warehou, should be eaten a few times a week. Other fish and seafood varieties low in mercury include prawns, lobsters, octopus, snapper, salmon, trout, trevally, whiting, canned tuna and salmon, and garfish. Fish that can accumulate higher levels of mercury should be eaten only occasionally, and include orange roughy (sea perch), catfish, swordfish, broadbill and marlin. Pregnant and breastfeeding women, women planning pregnancy and children under six should only eat one serve of these fish a week (orange roughy and catfish) or a fortnight (the rest), and no other servings of other fish in that time. For more information go to www.foodauthority.nsw.gov.au or www.foodstandards.gov.au.

COFFEE BREAK

They may look fabulous, but spending good money on an upmarket espresso machine won't guarantee you a great-tasting coffee.

If you're someone who can't function in the morning without a jolt of coffee, you might've considered getting an automatic espresso machine. Think how easy it'd be — stagger into the kitchen bleary-eyed, press a button, and hey presto! Espresso.

If you're all about convenience and not too fussed about getting a great coffee, this may do. But if it's full bean flavour you're after, the $210 manual **BREVILLE Café Roma ESP8B** that was the Best Buy in last year's test (see *Still a bargain buy*, page 13) made better-tasting coffee than the automatics we tested, for a fraction of the price. Unlike the automatic models, though, this manual machine won't grind the beans for you. To do this, we can recommend the **DELONGHI KG100 Coffee Grinder** ($169), the best model from last year's coffee grinder test (CHOICE, August 2004).

THE TEST

In our latest coffee makers test our experts assessed nine automatic machines costing between $800 and $1500. We wanted to know how easy they were to use, how the taste and temperature of their coffee rated, how well they frothed milk and how long they took to make a coffee. We also looked at features exclusive to automatic machines (See *What to look for*, page 11).

Based on our results, it's hard to recommend any of the automatic models tested. If you must have an automatic, the **SAECO Incanto S-Class De Luxe**, the **SAECO Magic De Luxe** and the **SOLIS Palazzo Rapid Steam** are your best bets. The **SAECO** models ranked highest for the taste of the coffee, but they still rated only 50%. The **SOLIS** scored well for ease of use and milk-frothing, but was slightly lower in the taste test (45%). The remaining espresso machines only scored 40% for taste.

AUSPIC IMAGES

WHAT TO BUY

If you want an automatic machine:

SAECO Incanto S-Class De Luxe	$1499
SAECO Magic De Luxe *	$1049
SOLIS Palazzo Rapid Steam	$1350

**Also available in black, $999*

If the taste of the coffee is the most important factor, the following Best Buy from our 2004 test scored better than any of the automatics for taste. While other newly released manual machines that we haven't yet tested could rate just as well, we can still recommend the:

BREVILLE Café Roma ESP8B $210

See *Still a bargain buy*, page 13, for more, and go to www.choiceextra.com.au and click on Aug 04 under 'Espresso machines' in the index for full ratings of all the tested manual machines. Some manual models rated even better for coffee taste than the **BREVILLE**, but cost $100–$200 more.

IN A NUTSHELL

Automatic espresso machines *are way cool and very convenient. Unfortunately, in our tests they didn't make as good a coffee (according to our expert tasters) as some of the much cheaper manual models in our previous test.*

If you're not such a coffee perfectionist as the highly discerning professional baristas who tasted the coffee for us, you might still enjoy the coffee made by these machines. But if your heart's set on an automatic, try to taste the coffee it produces before buying (see *What to look for*).

Our taste test compared short blacks, and adding milk would change the taste a bit. Still, given the cost of these machines it's disappointing to have to consider ways to disguise their coffee's taste.

AUTOMATIC VS MANUAL

By 'manual' machine we mean a basic electric espresso maker. You have to do all the work — fill the tank with water, add and tamp the ground coffee in the filter, secure it in the machine, press a switch to start and stop the machine, remove the filter holder and empty the basket. A semi-automatic machine is almost identical, except the pump stops automatically at the end of the coffee-making process so that a preset quantity of coffee gets made every time.

All the machines tested this time are automatic. They're incredibly easy to use — you don't even have to grind the coffee. Once you've poured the beans into the hopper, filled the tank with water and pressed the coffee button, you can put your feet up, though you'll still need to froth some milk if you're after a latte or cappuccino.

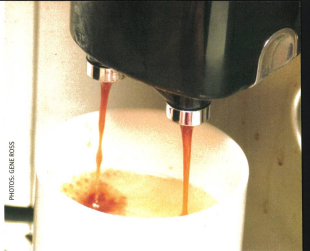
THERMOBLOCKS AND BOILERS

Most of the espresso machines on test use a thermoblock heating system; the rest — the two **SAECO** and the **SOLIS** machines in the *What to buy* list — use boilers. A thermoblock is a metal block through which water passes to be heated. It holds only a little water at a time so it's supposed to keep the water temperature constant. A boiler, on the other hand, contains a larger body of water. It works in the same way as your hot water tank at home.

Automatic espresso machines have either a single or double thermoblock or boiler. In a single heating system, the same boiler/thermoblock produces hot water for the coffee as well as making the steam to froth the milk.

A machine with a double boiler or thermoblock has one heating system for brewing the coffee and another for frothing the milk. In this test, the **JURA**, **SUNBEAM**, **KRUPS** and **KENWOOD** have single thermoblocks while the **DELONGHI** and **GAGGIA** have double thermoblocks. Of the machines with boilers, the **SAECO Incanto S-Class De Luxe** and the **SOLIS** each have a double boiler and the **SAECO Magic De Luxe** a single boiler.

The salespeople for espresso machines say that with a double boiler or thermoblock, once you've brewed the coffee, the steam to froth the milk is available straightaway. With a single heating system, you can wait anywhere between 30 seconds and a minute before moving from brewing to frothing (or vice versa). But our tests found little difference between single and double heating systems in terms of waiting. It was possible to go virtually straight from brewing to frothing using all the automatics except the **KENWOOD**, where we had to wait a minute for the temperature to change before we could froth the milk.



PHOTOS: GENE BOSS

ON THE BOIL

Regarding temperature, it's vital the water is hot (around 90–95°C) at the point of brewing to get a good extraction of the aroma, oil and flavour of the beans — in other words, a decent-tasting coffee. We tested the coffee temperature once it had been poured into the cups, so it would have cooled down a bit on its way. The average temperature of the coffee in the cup was only between 65°C and 72°C, which could well contribute to the less than ideal taste of most of the coffees.

Consistency of temperature was also tested. We made four consecutive coffees as soon as the machine was switched on and ready to use, then left the machine on for 10 minutes and again made four cups successively. The **SAECO Incanto S-Class De Luxe** was the most consistent; the least consistent was the **KENWOOD Auto Elite ES817**. See the table, page 13, for actual temperatures.

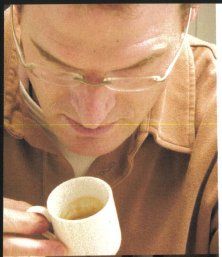
MAKE MINE A LATTE

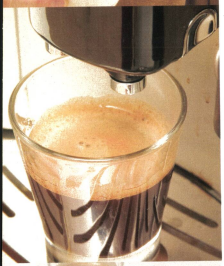
When you're frothing milk, it should be heated to around 65°C (it burns at around 82°C). The aim is to get a creamy froth where the bubbles are so tiny you can't see them. Five machines came close to these criteria, producing good-quality froth and scoring 70% or 80%.

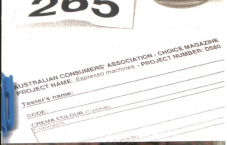
All models came with a froth enhancer attachment, a sleeve that fits over the steam nozzle and takes all the artistry out of frothing. However, we weren't able to produce good-quality froth using the froth enhancers. When we removed them, which is possible on all but two machines, we got much better results.

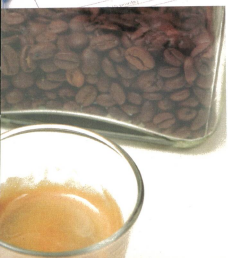
SKIM OR FULL FAT?

"Smooth, creamy, silky milk froth is what you want to produce," says Matthew Gee from Barista Basics. He says full-cream milk produces the best-quality froth. However, skim milk, because of its higher protein content, will produce ***more*** *froth. The downside of using skim milk is that the froth tends to separate more quickly. Whatever you decide to use, make sure you start with really cold milk – it'll produce better froth.*









EXPERT TIPS FOR A GREAT CUP OF COFFEE

Our thanks go to Matthew and David Gee from Barista Basics, and Lance Witham from Witham's Coffee and Tea. Not only did they sip their way through lots of espressos made by the test machines, they also gave us some gems of advice on coffee making:

- For best results with home espresso machines, experiment with the particle size of the grind until you get an extraction time of about 20–25 seconds.
- A medium or mild roast (for example, a 'City' roast) tends to get a better result with home espresso machines — the darker roasts can produce a bitter-tasting coffee in these machines. But, as Matthew points out, it's all a matter of personal taste.
- Use coffee beans rather than pre-ground coffee as they stay fresh for longer. Pre-ground coffee is also often too coarse for pump-style machines such as these automatics.
- The best place to store coffee for everyday use is where it's cool and dry, at room temperature — not in the fridge or freezer. However, coffee beans can be stored for up to two weeks in the freezer if they're well wrapped.

What to look for

- When shopping for an automatic coffee maker, ask the salesperson to make you a cup so you can check the taste. (Some **DOMAYNE** and **HARVEY NORMAN** outlets have display machines that let you try out the coffee in the store.)
- If there's a display machine, ask the assistant to froth some milk so you can check the milk-frothing mechanism. You're looking for creamy froth with small bubbles. (see *Make mine a latte*, left)
- Make sure the water tank is easy to fill.
- Controls should be easy to operate. Digital displays are better than indicator lights as they're easier to understand, especially when you're programming your machine.

Other features to look for are:

- Automatic switch-off — great if you're a bit forgetful.
- A grinder adjustment, so you can adjust how fine the grind of the coffee is. (We adjusted all the test machines as their factory-set grinds weren't satisfactory.)
- 'Dregs full' indicator, so your machine won't be overflowing with spent coffee.
- Variable coffee strength, so you can adjust the intensity of the coffee.
- Wash and decalcifying cycle: takes all the guesswork out of cleaning.

For more info on what to look for when shopping for an espresso machine, go to www.choiceextra.com.au and click on Aug 04 under 'Espresso machines' in the index.

PROFILES

Automatic models in the *What to buy* list are profiled in rank order. Prices are recommended retail, as supplied by manufacturers in June 2005.

SAECO INCANTO S-CLASS DE LUXE

Price: $1499

GOOD POINTS

- Consistent temperature when making consecutive cups.
- Multilingual digital display for functions and programming.
- Very intuitive programming.

BAD POINTS

- Only scored 50% for the taste of the espresso.
- Grinder fineness control is hard to turn.
- The exterior is more difficult to clean than on some other machines.

SAECO MAGIC DE LUXE (SILVER)

Price: $1049*

GOOD POINTS

- Good-quality milk froth.
- Very easy to remove coffee dregs.

BAD POINTS

- Only scored 50% for the taste of the espresso.
- Easy to burn your hands on the steam wand.
- Coffee temperature is inconsistent when making consecutive cups.
- Control buttons aren't easy to use.
- The exterior is more difficult to clean than on some other machines.
- Programming isn't as easy as on some other machines.

* *Also available in black for $999.*

SAECO Incanto S-Class De Luxe

SOLIS Palazzo Rapid Steam

SAECO Magic De Luxe (silver)

PROFILES: JULIE HOWARD

SOLIS PALAZZO RAPID STEAM

Price: $1350

GOOD POINTS

- Very good-quality milk froth.
- Very easy to remove coffee dregs.
- Steam delivery is good and fairly constant, and it builds up fairly quickly.

BAD POINTS

- Only scored 45% for the taste of the espresso.
- Coffee temperature is inconsistent when making consecutive cups.
- The steam control knob is awkward to use and control buttons have to be pushed hard.
- The exterior is more difficult to clean than on some other machines.
- Programming isn't as easy as on some other machines.

WHAT ABOUT THE REST?

The remaining coffee makers only scored 40% in the taste test. Most, particularly the **GAGGIA, KRUPS** and **KENWOOD,** produce a cup of coffee at temperatures that appear to be too low to have extracted the full flavour and aroma, and which might also be too cool for some tastes. The coffee temperature produced by most of these machines was also inconsistent when making consecutive cups. On a more positive note, the **SUNBEAM** and **KRUPS** make good-quality milk froth, while the **DELONGHI, SUNBEAM** and **GAGGIA** scored well for ease of use.

	PERFORMANCE				COMPONENTS OF COFFEE-MAKING SCORE		
Brand / model (in rank order)	**1 Overall score** (%)	**2 Coffee-making score** (%)	**3 Ease of use score** (%)	**4 Milk-frothing score** (%)	**5 Taste test score** (%)	**Time to brew first two cups** (min:sec)	**6 Coffee temperatur** (C)
SAECO Incanto S-Class De Luxe	63	60	70	60 **(C)**	50	2:20	72
SAECO Magic De Luxe **(A)**	62	57	69	70 **(C)**	50	1:50	67
SOLIS Palazzo Rapid Steam	62	55	71	80 **(C)**	45	1:45	69
SUNBEAM Café Barista EM8800	60	50	74	80 **(C)**	40	2:00	69
DELONGHI Magnifica Rapid Cappuccino EAM3400.S	59	50	76	60 **(C)**	40	2:20	70
GAGGIA Syncrony Compact Digital	59	50	73	70 **(C)**	40	1:50	66
KRUPS Orchestro Type 889	58	50	68	80 **(C)**	40	1:20	65
JURA Impressa E80 **(B)**	52	49	70	20 **(D)**	40	1:30	68
KENWOOD Auto Elite ES817	49	47	64	20 **(D)**	40	2:35	66

Still a bargain buy

To see how a cheap manual machine compared to more expensive automatic models, we retested the Best Buy from our 2004 assessment of espresso machines (CHOICE, August 2004) — the manual **BREVILLE Café Roma ESP8B** — alongside our nine automatics. We were particularly interested in comparing their abilities to make a coffee that tastes good.

Surprisingly, the cheapie outperformed the more expensive espresso machines in the taste test, scoring 65%. The **BREVILLE** also made the hottest coffee and was equal best in terms of coffee temperature range. Its froth also rated 80% — the top score in the froth-making category, on a par with three of the automatics. Obviously, as it's a manual it can't be compared for ease of use. But at $210, we think it's worth the extra bit of work if you don't want to sacrifice taste for convenience.

JULIE HOWARD

MODELS FROM OUR 2004 TEST STILL AVAILABLE

Brand / model	Taste test score (%)	Price ($)*
SUNBEAM Café Latte EM5400	75	350
KRUPS F893 Nespresso	70	400
BREVILLE Café Roma ESP8B **(A)**	65	210
SAECO Magic Espresso Silver	65	349
DELONGHI EC410	60	249
SAECO Via Venezia Espresso SIN 006X	60	449
SUNBEAM Café Aromatic EM5800	60	449
KRUPS Nespresso Concept FNA1	55	600
GAGGIA Cubika	40	349
LA PAVONI Europiccola	30	930

* *Prices are recommended retail as provided by manufacturers in June 2005.*

(A) *Retested this year and got the same score. You can't directly compare the other taste test scores with the scores for the automatics.*

All models have a water tank empty warning, variable coffee strength (except the **KENWOOD**) and programmable in-the-cup coffee quantity adjustments.

1 Overall score

This consists of

- Coffee-making score: 60%
- Ease of use score: 30%
- Milk-frothing score: 10%

2 Coffee-making score

This includes:

- Taste test score: 70%
- Time score: 10%
- Temperature score: 10%
- Temperature range score: 10%

3 Ease of use score

The following aspects were weighted equally:

- Water container convenience.
- Grinder convenience.
- Spent coffee removal.
- Milk frothing.
- Controls.
- Exterior cleaning.
- Operating the unit.
- Programming.

4 Milk-frothing score

This measures the quality of the milk froth produced.

5 Taste test score

Three experts judged the coffee for crema colour and thickness, aroma, flavour, mouth feel and aftertaste.

6 Coffee temperature and coffee temperature range

See On the boil, page 10, for how we tested and why temperature is important.

FEATURES					SPECIFICATIONS				
6 Coffee temperature range (C)	Hopper empty warning	Cup-warming plate	Cord storage	Automatic switch-on	Dimensions (H x W x D, cm)	Warranty (years)	Origin	Manufacturer / distributor	Price ($)*
3	✓	✓	✓	✓	38 x 29 x 41	2 **(E)**	Italy	Saeco	1499
8.5	✓	✓			40 x 39 x 45	1	Italy	Saeco	1049
6.5	✓		✓		38 x 30 x 43	1	Switzerland	Diamond C Services	1350
8		✓	✓		38 x 31 x 41	1	China	Sunbeam	1000
8	✓	✓		✓	37 x 28 x 39	1	Italy	De'Longhi	1499
7	✓	✓		✓	39 x 28 x 41	1	Italy	Shriro	1399
8			✓		35 x 28 x 41	1	Switzerland	Group SEB	1196
9.5	✓		✓		35 x 28 x 43	2	Switzerland	Jura	1495
11.5		✓	✓		43 x 36 x 37	1	China	Hagemeyer	799

* *Prices are recommended retail as supplied by manufacturers in June 2005.*

(A) *Also available in black, $999.*

(B) *Also available as the E85 with a platinum finish, $1695.*

(C) *The test was done with the froth enhancer removed as this gave better results.*

(D) *Can't be used without the froth enhancer.*

(E) *Five years on the filter holder.*

MULTIPURPOSE LADDERS — ups and downs

In our last ladder test in 1997 we could recommend only one multipurpose ladder. Have they improved since then?

GENE ROSS

IN A NUTSHELL

Of the seven *multipurpose ladders we examined, only one passed all our tests.*

If you don't need *the versatility of a multipurpose ladder, you're probably better off with a specialised type like a stepladder.*

Ladders are an almost essential tool for trade work, home maintenance and gardening. You're entitled to expect your ladder to provide a good, stable work platform while you clean the gutters or paint the ceiling. So even though the Australian standard for ladders isn't mandatory for manufacturers, we think it's important that all ladders on the market pass the standard for safe and solid construction.

We tested seven multipurpose ladders. Before we look at the results, let's take a look back at our previous ladder tests.

PAST EXPERIENCE

We last tested 1.8 m metal stepladders, 1.8 m step-extension ladders (also known as dual-purpose ladders) and multipurpose ladders to important clauses of the standard and reported the results in CHOICE, January 1997.

By and large, the results were disappointing, with more than half the ladders failing one or more standard tests. Particularly disappointing were multipurpose ladders — none passed all the tests, and we could only suggest one to consider buying.

When we asked manufacturers to review and comment on our test results, several were keen to fix the problems. Many redesigned ladders then passed our subsequent tests (reported in CHOICE, December 1997).

But even then, we could still only recommend one multipurpose ladder. That was eight years ago. Have multipurpose ladders improved?

VERSATILITY

These ladders have three sets of hinges along their length, enabling them to be configured in different ways. They can be set up as stepladders, straight ladders, stairwell scaffolds, working platforms or stand-off ladders (where the top section is used to stand the ladder at a distance from the wall — it's useful for cleaning gutters, for example). They fold into relatively compact shapes, so can be easier to transport and store than more conventional ladders.

Unfortunately, while they can be set up in many configurations, they aren't easy to use. Only one of the ladders tested scored more than 50% for ease of use, and three were judged to be 'poor'. The joint

locks can be hard to operate. The ladders are heavy and bulky and can require a fair amount of physical strength to manipulate them into shape. A ladder that's designed for one particular type of task, like a stepladder, will usually be lighter and easier to use for that task than a multipurpose ladder.

THE VERDICT

Disappointingly, it seems multipurpose ladders haven't significantly improved since our 1997 tests. Only one model, the **LOFTY Multi 6DL**, passed all our tests this time around. Its unique dual-locking joint system is a good concept, designed to stop you accidentally locking only one joint of a pair. But it's not as easy to operate as it could be, because the locking dowels can be difficult to align. While this ladder technically passed the unlocked joint test (see *How we tested*, right), the natural position of the opened locks leaves the dowels partially engaged. In this position a user might think the joints are locked when in fact they're not, and they could partly climb the **LOFTY** before it collapsed under them. When unlocking the joints you need to move the locking lever firmly all the way to be sure the dowels have fully disengaged.

The other ladders all failed various clauses of the Australian standard, despite claiming to comply with it. Some are structurally sound enough to be still worth considering, but others failed structural tests and aren't recommended. See *What to buy*, below right, and the table (page 18) for more details.

Multipurpose ladders clearly have a tough time with these tests, and the ladder joints are often the reason why. The joints are typically very stiff, which can help them pass some tests (such as the single joint lock test) but fail others (such as the unlocked joint test). Ideally, the joints need to be:

- Easy to lock and unlock.
- Secure when locked.
- Easy to check if they're locked or not.
- Easy to move when unlocked.

None of the ladders tested fully exhibits all these qualities.

HOW WE TESTED

We tested the ladders according to key clauses of the current Australian standard. Based on our experiences in 1997, these are the clauses most likely to show up a ladder's weak points.

- Stile bending and deflection — checks that the stiles (the sides of the ladder that support the treads) aren't too flimsy and will survive heavy loading.
- Permanent set — checks if the ladder will permanently warp under load.
- Tread to stile shearing — checks the treads (rungs) will survive heavy loading.
- 'Walking' — tests the ladder's rigidity.
- Work platform — the ladder is configured as a work platform (like a scaffold) and subjected to a heavy load.
- Unlocked joint test — the ladder is set up as a straight ladder against a wall with both central hinges unlocked. The ladder must fold under its own weight or a minimal load to ensure it collapses before you climb onto it rather than afterwards.
- Single joint lock test — the ladder is set up as a straight ladder with one of the central joints left unlocked. It's leaned against a wall at 75 degrees and then subjected to a heavy load. The idea is to see if the ladder can still support a person's weight when set up incorrectly or when one of the central joint locks fails. The ladder is allowed to suffer damage during the test but mustn't collapse. It's a severe test, and most ladders struggle with it. In our 1997 test, all four multipurpose ladders failed this test. This time they all passed.

WHAT TO BUY

BUNNINGS Heavy Duty Multipurpose Ladder	$169
BRONSON 12 Step Multifold Ladder C3700 (Scaffold model) This model is being phased out but may still be available.	$159
GEELONG Aluminium Multifold Ladder MFL 2.6	$95
LOFTY Multi 6DL You may need to order this model through your hardware store.	$193

- The **BUNNINGS** marginally failed the tread to stile shear test. (See *How we tested*, above, for details.) Also, while it passed the single joint lock test, it was severely deformed in the process and was rendered unusable. However, this is a very severe test, so we think the ladder's still worth considering.
- The **BRONSON** and **GEELONG** ladders failed the unlocked joint test, but these ladders are also worth considering provided you always make doubly sure you lock all the joints before use (which you should do anyway, with any multipurpose ladder).
- The **LOFTY** passed all our tests, so it's worth considering even though it scored poorly for ease of use.

Other ladder types

STEPLADDERS

These are the common 'A-frame' ladders, and are the most popular type for home use. For typical household tasks like indoor painting or changing lightbulbs, a 1.8 m domestic stepladder is all most people ever need.

In previous tests the main problem we've found with some stepladders is 'walking'. If a ladder isn't rigid enough it walks when you shift your weight from side to side — it twists and moves unexpectedly, which can be enough to make you fall off, or even move the feet over an edge or step if you're close to one.

GEOFF AMBLER

The diagonal spreaders on the Dayton stepladder (left) are too high to add enough rigidity — spreaders need to be at about middle height, as on the ladder on the right.

Stepladders that have spreaders (cross-bracing between the stiles) tend to be more rigid and less likely to walk. In previous tests, diagonal spreaders have given better support than parallel ones.

When we checked in major Sydney hardware stores, many of the 1.8 m stepladders available appeared to be the same models that passed our tests previously. So we picked just three models to put through the walking test. Two of them, the **GEELONG Single Sided Stepladder** and **ULLRICH Light Duty Stepladder**, passed — just. The third, the **DAYTON 6 Foot Stepladder**, failed, in our opinion because the spreaders are positioned too high to sufficiently strengthen the ladder (see the photo, above).

STEP-EXTENSION LADDERS

These give you two ladders in one. You can use it as a normal stepladder, or swing the back legs up and lock them in place to form a longer straight ladder.

We didn't test these this time, but in our last test most met the standard with flying colours. Only one ladder couldn't be recommended due to poor catch design.

Look for a ladder with catches that lock solidly into place. Diagonal spreaders are also good when using this type of ladder as a stepladder, but they aren't vital since the extra treads along the back legs increase the ladder's rigidity.

PLATFORM STEPLADDERS

This type of ladder features an extra-wide step at the top that allows you to stand fairly comfortably, or rest work tools or a can of paint. They often have a rail above the top step that you can brace your legs against. We did a walk test on two examples of this type of ladder — the **BAILEY Professional 4 Step** and **Satellite 6**. Both passed.

If you're after a good platform stepladder, look for a strongly built model with cross bracing and a broad, secure platform with a non-slip surface. Ideally the platform should lock in place. Small two- or three-step platform stepladders can be especially useful for indoor tasks, as they can be easier to stand on than an ordinary stepladder.

GEOFF AMBLER

A top rail to brace yourself against makes platform stepladders more comfortable to stand on.

Profiles

These multipurpose ladders are worth considering. They're profiled in order of overall ease of use score. Prices are what we paid in March 2005, or average retail, as supplied by manufacturers.

BUNNINGS HEAVY DUTY MULTIPURPOSE LADDER

Price: $169

GOOD POINTS

- Best ease of use overall.
- Very good straight ladder.
- Good stepladder.
- Good work platform.

BAD POINTS

- Marginally failed tread to stile shear test.

BRONSON 12 STEP MULTIFOLD LADDER C3700 (SCAFFOLD MODEL)

Price: $159

GOOD POINTS

- Very good work platform — comes with removable planks for this purpose.

BAD POINTS

- Difficult to set up.
- Failed the unlocked joint test.
- A little unstable on even surfaces when used as a stepladder.

GEELONG ALUMINIUM MULTIFOLD LADDER MFL 2.6

Price: $95

GOOD POINTS

- Good straight ladder and work platform.
- Five-year warranty.

BAD POINTS

- Failed the unlocked joint test.
- Difficult to set up.
- Heavy for its size (it's shorter than the other models).
- Potential finger trap in the joints.

LOFTY MULTI 6DL

Price: $193

GOOD POINTS

- Passed all tests.
- Good stepladder.
- Has one adjustable-length leg, making the ladder more stable on uneven ground.
- Joint locks are designed to ensure that both joints (of a pair) lock simultaneously, so that you can't accidentally lock only one.
- Lightweight (compared to many multipurpose ladders).

BAD POINTS

- Very difficult to set up — the joint locks can be hard to operate. You need to carefully ensure the locks have fully engaged or disengaged before use.
- Poor straight ladder — it flexes significantly when climbed on, which you might find disconcerting.
- Poor work platform, and it needs a special plank in this configuration, which you have to make yourself (see footnote G, page 19).

WHAT ABOUT THE REST?

- The **BRONSON C365IND** has been discontinued but is worth considering if you can find it.
- The **LOFTY Multi 6IL** failed the stile deflection test, and the **PERFORMER KMCFD-6110** failed the stile bending test.

PROFILES: TAMARA GRAHAM

Brand / model (in rank order)	Passed standard tests*	1 Overall ease of use score (%)	COMPONENTS OF EASE OF USE SCORE: Setting-up score (%)	Score as straight ladder (%)	Score as stepladder (%)	Score as w platform (
WORTH CONSIDERING						
BUNNINGS Heavy Duty Multipurpose Ladder	**(C)**	64	55	80	70	75
BRONSON 12 Step Multifold Ladder C3700	**(A)**	48	35	60	50	80
GEELONG Aluminium Multifold Ladder MFL 2.6	**(D)**	47	30	70	60	75
BRONSON Industrial 12 Step Multifold Ladder C36SIND	**(B)**	46	35	65	45	65
LOFTY Multi 6DL	✓	30	10	45	75	45
NOT RECOMMENDED						
PERFORMER KMCFD-6110	**(E)**	38	30	10	60	75
LOFTY Multi 6IL	**(F)**	30	10	40	75	45

What to look for

While there are some weaknesses of ladders that only laboratory testing will reveal, there are things you can check for yourself when shopping.

With all ladders

Unpack and inspect the ladder in the shop before you buy. It should be:

- The right height for your needs.
- A manageable weight.
- Rigid and secure when set up.
- Have feet with a sure grip.
- Labelled with clear safety instructions.

Adjustable-length legs can be very useful for working on uneven ground.

Check the ladder's duty rating — domestic (for loads up to 100 kg) or industrial (up to 120 kg, or 150 kg) — so that you get one suitable for your purpose.

With multipurpose ladders

- Catches should lock securely, be smooth to operate and show clearly whether they're locked or unlocked.
- Look for ladders with a similar stile depth to those on a regular stepladder (around 8 cm).
- If you plan to use it as a work platform, look for a ladder that comes with a fitted plank.

With stepladders

- Look for diagonal spreaders situated at about the mid point of the ladder.
- Safety handles can be useful, especially if you aren't comfortable using ladders.
- Holders or platforms for tools and paint tins can be handy.

Ladder safety

A 2001 study in Melbourne showed that ladder instability, where the ladder slips or tilts out of position, is a significant cause of ladder accidents. Some accidents may have been caused by faulty ladders, but most resulted from unsafe usage, such as bad ladder placement or dangerous conduct when on the ladder. The study noted that most ladder accidents happened to older men doing home maintenance or gardening. Over 40% of ladder accidents resulted in hospitalisation.

Even the best ladder can't save you if you misuse it. Here's our guide to safe ladder usage.

Do

- Read and follow the safety instructions.
- Check it's undamaged, clean and dry before you use it.
- Place it on a firm, dry and level surface that's not slippery.
- Make sure all joints and spreaders are locked firmly in place.
- When using a straight or extension ladder, follow the 'one to four' rule: four measures up the wall should be matched by one measure away from the wall.
- Lean straight or extension ladders against a strong, solid surface.
- Extension ladders should be secured (for example, tied off with rope) if you're going to be working at a height for a long time.
- Climb up and down facing the ladder.
- Always keep at least one hand (preferably both) on the ladder when ascending or descending.
- Wear shoes with a good grip on the sole, to avoid slipping.

IFICATIONS

...h as ...ght ...r (cm)	Length as stepladder (cm) *	Height as work platform (cm)	Length as work platform (cm)	2 Available configurations	Storage dimensions (H x W x D, cm)	Weight (kg)	3 Stated duty rating	Warranty (years)	Origin	Manufacturer / distributor	Price ($)†
	189	99	146	S, SL, WP, SWP, SOL	103 x 58 x 28	12	Industrial	1	Taiwan	Bunnings	169
	187	96	148	S, SL, WP, SWP, SOL	99 x 48 x 29	11.8 **(H)**	Domestic	3	Taiwan	Bronson	159 **(K)**
	137	75	91	S, SL, WP, SWP, SOL	78 x 49 x 25	11.4	Domestic	5	China	Geelong Sales Company	95
	187	96	148	S, SL, WP, SWP, SOL	99 x 49 x 29	13.3	Industrial	1	Taiwan	Bronson	299 **(K)**
	178	83	182 **(G)**	S, SL, WP, SOL	91 x 58 x 30	10.4	Domestic	1	Australia	Geelong Sales Company	193
	160	105	91	S, SL, WP, SWP, SOL	101 x 58 x 28	10.2 **(H)**	Domestic	**(J)**	China	Kmart	115
	178	83	182 **(G)**	S, SL, WP, SOL	91 x 58 x 30	10	Industrial	1	Australia	Geelong Sales Company	204

- Store ladders in a dry, ventilated place, to prevent rust and rot. Hang them horizontally if possible, and protect wooden ladders with clear varnish or linseed oil.

Don't

- Don't use a folded stepladder leaning against a wall: its feet may not be safely grounded.
- Don't try to extend a ladder by balancing it on boxes, bricks or other unstable bases.
- If you need to balance the ladder feet on uneven ground, don't rest the high leg on a brick; instead, dig a hole for the lower leg.
- Don't load the ladder beyond its rating.
- Don't carry a load that needs both your hands, or is heavy enough to unbalance you, up or down a ladder.
- Don't put the ladder in front of a door that may open onto it.
- Don't reach or lean out too far in any direction from the ladder.
- Don't use a metal ladder for electrical work or near power lines (use a fibreglass or wooden ladder instead).
- Don't stand higher up on a ladder than is recommended on its label.
- Don't paint your ladder, as this may conceal cracks.
- Don't use ladders in strong wind.
- Don't use step or step-extension ladders as scaffold supports. They aren't designed for this and may not be stable enough.
- Don't use a ladder if another, safer way can be found to do the job (for example, using an extension handle on a paint roller).

* *See* How we tested, *page 15, for details of the tests we conducted.*

† *Price paid in March 2005 unless noted otherwise.*

(A) *Being phased out, but may still be found in stores.*

(B) *Model discontinued as of June; see* What about the rest?, *page 17.*

(C) *Marginally failed tread to stile shear test.*

(D) *Failed unlocked joint test.*

(E) *Failed stile bending test.*

(F) *Failed stile deflection test.*

(G) *Needs a special plank because the end rungs are approximately 20 mm below the others. This is neither supplied with the ladder nor available as an extra, so you'd have to make your own.*

(H) *Plus approximately 2 kg for planks.*

(J) *"You must be completely satisfied with this product's performance, or your money back."*

(K) *Average retail price advised by manufacturer.*

1 Overall ease of use score

- Setting-up score: 55%
- Score as straight ladder: 15%
- Score as stepladder: 15%
- Score as work platform: 15%

2 Available configurations

The ladder can be configured as a straight ladder (SL), work platform (WP), small work platform (SWP) and/or standoff ladder (SOL).

3 Stated duty rating

- Domestic = 100 kg
- Industrial = 120 kg or more

Multipurpose ladders aren't only versatile, they also fold up into a relatively compact shape, making them easier to transport and store than a conventional ladder. The downside is all the locking and unlocking of joints required — our testers didn't find any of the ladders tested easy to set up.

Low-carb — but highly processed

Low-carb processed foods are no healthier than their conventional equivalents — but can cost a lot more.

IN A NUTSHELL

- **Low-carb versions** *of processed foods such as pasta certainly have less carbohydrate and usually fewer kilojoules — but they don't always come cheap and there's little evidence for claims that they're a healthier option.*
- **Food manufacturers** *replace some of the sugars and starches with synthetic ingredients, so you can miss out on valuable nutrients that come with the less highly processed conventional versions.*
- **If you want to lose weight** *you're better off eating whole grains, fruit and vegetables, with lean meat, fish and low-fat dairy products — and exercising regularly.*

A survey last year found that one in five adult Australians said they'd tried, or intended to try, a low-carbohydrate diet. Most of us have at least heard of the Atkins diet (or some other form of low-carb diet) and worldwide the Atkins diet books have sold more than 45 million copies.

Enthusiasm for low-carb diets has never been higher. These diets claim to offer a quick fix that's relatively painless and really works. You can start the day with bacon and eggs, enjoy juicy steaks with just a few green vegetables, and some say you can eat as much butter as you like, and lashings of cream — but you lose weight, and you never feel hungry.

So it's no surprise that plenty of people have been sucked into the low-carb craze — and the food industry hasn't been slow to cash in on the action.

PROCESSED AND PRICY

There's no shortage of processed foods with explicit low-carb claims or names such as 'Carb Options', 'Carb Smart' and 'CarboRite' (not to mention the Atkins brand name itself), which give the impression that they're suitable for people on low-carb diets.

In the table (page 23) we've listed some of the brands you're most likely to find in the big supermarkets and compared them with the nearest conventional equivalent we could find.

The low-carb brands all have less carbohydrate per serve than the conventional versions, but not necessarily so much less as to make a significant difference to your overall diet. For instance, unless you like it better, there's no point paying extra for **ATKINS Quick Cuisine Creamy Ranch Dressing** with 0.7 g of carbs per serve when a serve of **PAUL NEWMAN'S OWN Ranch Dressing** gives you only about half a gram more carbs. And much the same applies to **EMPOWER LOW CARB Chocolate**, which has only marginally fewer carbs than the same amount of **CADBURY Dairy Milk Chocolate**, but packs in more kilojoules.

And these products aren't necessarily compatible with a genuinely low-carb diet (see *What does low-carb really mean?*, right). The initial induction phase of the Atkins diet, for example, restricts you to 20 g of carbs per day. A serve of **CONTINENTAL CARB OPTIONS Chinese Sweet and Sour Stir Fry Sauce** provides a high proportion of this in one hit (don't even think of adding some rice). And if your craving's for pasta, a serve of **RAGULETTO CARB OPTIONS Spirals** takes you way over the limit with almost 50 g of carbs in a normal-sized serve of 100 g pasta.

Of more concern, though, is that some of these products claim to be healthier generally. **CARB OPTIONS** says it's "committed to providing great-tasting lower-carbohydrate food that helps support your healthy lifestyle". The Atkins.com website has links to research material claiming health benefits for conditions as diverse as diabetes and depression. In reality there's little evidence to back these claims (see *Spin doctors*, above right).

To add insult to injury, you can pay up to 500% more for some of these low-carb products. A single 28 g **ATKINS Endulge Wafer Crisp Mint** (a chocolate wafer biscuit) will set you back about $2.95 compared with about 45 cents for a Tim Tam (35 g). Or if it's ice cream you fancy, **NESTLE PETERS CARB SMART Vanilla** is almost double the price per serve of **PETERS Extra Creamy Vanilla**. It's not always the case, though. For example, **CONTINENTAL CARB OPTIONS Cup-a-Soup Chicken and Sweet Corn** is the same price per serve as its conventional twin, **CONTINENTAL Cup-a-Soup Gourmet Chicken and Sweet Corn** — suggesting that manufacturers don't always *have* to charge extra for their low-carb versions.

But if you really want to be on a low-carb diet, stick to foods that are naturally low-carb (such as meat, fish and non-starchy vegetables). Foods as uncompromisingly carbohydrate as pasta don't fit easily into a low-carb diet.

Spin doctors

Fad diets sell books, attract media hype, and generate new market opportunities for manufacturers of processed foods. And as the fans of the late Dr Atkins never tire of telling us, a low-carb diet really can help you to lose weight.

The theory behind it is that when you cut down sufficiently on your intake of carbohydrates, your body converts from burning carbohydrates to burning fat as the primary energy source. This new metabolic state is supposed to put you into a 'negative energy balance' and make you lose weight. But despite the hype there's little independent scientific evidence to support this. Without carbohydrate, you lose several kilos of glycogen (stored carbohydrate) and water from the muscles. Your body also breaks down protein (from food or muscles) to produce the glucose that's needed to keep your brain functioning. This all appears as weight loss.

Low-carb diets are effective only in the short term. Clinical trials comparing low-carb diets with low-fat diets consistently show that on average people lose more weight on a low-carb diet for the first six months, but over a year any advantage disappears. And low-fat diets are definitely healthier in the long term.

There's no evidence that a low-carb diet is safe beyond about 12 months. It may put you at risk of heart disease and kidney problems, not to mention increasing your chances of developing osteoporosis. Although the Atkins diet, for example, includes some fruits and vegetables and recommmends supplements, there's the risk that you won't get enough dietary fibre, antioxidants and other trace nutrients that are important in a healthy diet. And many low-carb dieters report side effects including constipation, headache, bad breath, muscle cramps, diarrhoea, general weakness and rashes.

You're much better off trying to exercise more and eat less — stick to a diet with plenty of whole grains, fruit and vegies, with lean meat and low-fat dairy products.

WHAT DOES LOW-CARB REALLY MEAN?

Consumers aren't helped by the fact that in Australia there's no clear definition of what 'low carbohydrate' actually means on a food label. From the end of this

GENE ROSS/JACQUI FRY

There's not much point paying extra for a low-carb food if the difference is minimal, as with the two above products *(see page 20).*

NOT SO NEW

Despite being the latest fad, low-carb diets are nothing new.

In 1864 William Banting published his Letter on Corpulence. *He was an upper-crust London undertaker (his firm had recently buried Prince Albert). Banting had been so overweight that he couldn't tie his shoelaces and could only go down stairs backwards — but he lost nearly 50 pounds (23 kg) in a year by following a diet low in carbohydrate but with plenty of meat and fish (and more than a modicum of alcohol).*

His book was such a runaway success that his name became a household word and the verb 'to bant', meaning to go on a diet, was still used in the 1960s.

year Canada will require foods labelled as 'low carbohydrate' to have 10% or less of available carbohydrates and 2 g or less of available carbohydrates per serving.

This makes sense in terms of what a consumer might reasonably expect of a low-carb food, but when we applied the Canadian standard to the low-carb products in our test, fewer than half of them complied. CHOICE would like to see Food Standards Australia New Zealand follow Canada's example and regulate 'low carbs' as it does other nutrition claims, now there are so many of these products in supermarkets.

TRICKS OF THE TRADE

Manufacturers have to replace the sugars and starches that are normally in foods with something else that doesn't count as 'carbohydrate' on the nutrition information panel to make 'low-carb' versions. Most substitute protein and dietary fibre, which is perfectly OK in principle. Most of us should be eating more fibre and the protein's usually from milk or soy. But you might be surprised by what's revealed in the small print on the label.

Dietary fibre isn't always what you might think. Nutritionists usually think of dietary fibre as simply the non-digestible plant material that you get from fruit, vegetables and whole grains. Strictly speaking, fibre is mostly another form of carbohydrate (the difference being that it's not digested and absorbed into the blood stream as glucose). But food manufacturers are now allowed to include the **synthetic analogues** maltodextrin and polydextrose within the term 'dietary fibre' (they have to be included in the list of ingredients on the label, but otherwise you wouldn't know). Maltodextrin is made from starch by partly breaking down its structure. Polydextrose is made from glucose and is described by its manufacturer as a 'specialty carbohydrate'. These synthetic analogues have some of the same nutritional benefits as natural fibre, but they don't come with the antioxidants and other beneficial phytochemicals that you get from fruit, vegetables and whole grains.

Some low-carb products make themselves look more impressive by claiming a much **smaller serve size** than a conventional equivalent. **RAGULETTO CARB OPTIONS Spirals** says its serve size is only 50 g, whereas most other packets of pasta that we looked at had serve sizes of at least twice that amount. A serve of **EMPOWER LOW CARB Chocolate** is only a miserable 14.2 g, whereas **CADBURY** suggests that a serve of **CADBURY Dairy Milk Chocolate** is 30 g.

1 Brand / product	2 Serve size (g)	3 Price per serve ($)	Nutrients per serve: Energy (kJ)	Total fat (g)	Total carbohydrate (g)
ATKINS Endulge Wafer Crisp Mint Biscuit	28	2.95	595	9.8	1.7
ARNOTT'S Tim Tam Original Biscuit	35	0.43	760	9.5	21.7
ATKINS Advantage Chocolate Shake	330	4.25	723	9.2	2.0
BIG M Chocolate Milk	330	0.90	1089	10.4	31.0
EMPOWER LOW CARB Chocolate	14	0.74	327	6.1	7.0
CADBURY Dairy Milk Chocolate	20	0.40	442	5.9	11.4
CONTINENTAL CARB OPTIONS Chinese Sweet & Sour Stir Fry Sauce	100	0.67	281	0.2	14.5
CONTINENTAL Asia Tonight Chinese Sweet & Sour Stir Fry Sauce	100	0.56	410	0.2	28.6
CONTINENTAL CARB OPTIONS Cup-a-Soup Chicken & Sweet Corn	100	0.38	123	1.3	3.4
CONTINENTAL Cup-a-Soup Gourmet Chicken & Sweet Corn	100	0.38	299	3.2	10.3
CONTINENTAL CARB OPTIONS Pasta & Sauce Four Cheeses	100	0.58	532	4.7	13.4
CONTINENTAL Pasta & Sauce Four Cheeses	100	0.37	572	4.3	19.3
ATKINS Quick Cuisine Pancake and Waffle Syrup	20	0.41	<1	<1	<1
COTTEE'S Maple Flavoured Syrup	20	0.12	227	0	13.3
CARB OPTIONS Apple & Cinnamon Cereal	50	0.55	865	7.0	20.2
KELLOGG'S Just Right Original Cereal	50	0.44	744	0.8	36.0
ATKINS Quick Cuisine Creamy Ranch Dressing	20	0.43	307	7.3	0.7
PAUL NEWMAN'S OWN Ranch Dressing	20	0.28	500	12.7	1.1
NESTLE PETERS CARB SMART Vanilla Ice Cream	50	0.37	173	1.4	2.4
PETERS Extra Creamy Vanilla Ice Cream	50	0.23	455	6.3	12.0
RAGULETTO CARB OPTIONS Bolognaise Sauce	100	0.53	156	0.7	5.6
RAGULETTO Bolognaise Classic Tomato Sauce	100	0.40	238	1.2	9.5
RAGULETTO CARB OPTIONS Spirals (pasta)	100	0.64	1360	1.5	47.4
SAN REMO Large Spirals (pasta)	100	0.40	1518	1.5	73.6
ATKINS Quick Cuisine Bake Mix	20	0.73	278	0.4	2.5
WHITE WINGS Plain Flour	20	0.04	299	0.2	15.7
NATURE'S WAY Slim Right Weight Loss Bar Choc Mint	50	2.98	696	5.1	15.0
UNCLE TOBYS Chewy Muesli Bars Choc Chip	31	0.47	540	4.0	19.8
ATKINS Quick Cuisine Ketch-A-Tomato	20	0.60	56	<1	2.7
FOUNTAIN Tomato Sauce	20	0.08	104	<1	5.4
CARLTON Pure Blond Beer	335	2.49	447	<0.1	3.6
CARLTON Draught Beer	335	2.79	519	0	9.0
LEAN CUISINE Chicken Cacciatore (frozen dinner) **(A)**	350	3.98	1180	5.3	35.0
WEIGHT WATCHERS Chicken Fettuccine (frozen dinner)	320	4.98	1280	4.8	49.6

(A) *It includes pasta; the packaging claims that it "helps you count your carbohydrate intake".*

1 Brand / product

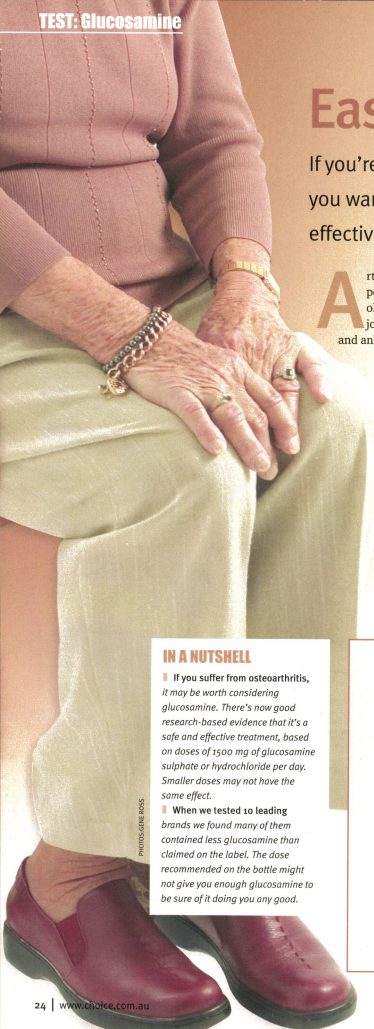
This is a sample of the more than 30 brands/types of 'low-carb' processed foods that we found in the major supermarket chains in May 2005. We've paired them with the closest conventional equivalent we could find. They're in no particular order.

2 Serve size

Manufacturers' recommended serve sizes vary. For ease of comparison we've used standardised serve sizes, unless the product is a single unit, such as a muesli bar.

3 Price per serve

This is based on the price we paid in Sydney supermarkets in May 2005. We bought the conventional version in the packet/container size that most closely matched the low-carb product.



Ease your knees

If you're buying glucosamine to treat your arthritis you want to be sure the brand you buy contains an effective dose.

Arthritis affects around three million Australians — around 15% of the population — and is the leading cause of pain and disability among older people. Osteoarthritis, its most common form, is a degenerative joint condition that affects weight-bearing joints such as the hips, knees and ankles as well as the hands and spine.

While it can't yet be cured, it can be treated. Currently most treatment programs include lifestyle changes like weight loss and physiotherapy, along with the common use of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) to manage the pain. The bad news is that the safety of these NSAIDs is increasingly under a cloud.

VIOXX was recently withdrawn from the market by its manufacturer after a link was found between its use and increased risk of heart attack or stroke. **CELEBREX**, while not withdrawn, was also implicated in posing an increased risk of heart problems. Even milder forms of NSAID like ibuprofen, which are sold in supermarkets and pharmacies under brand names such as **NUROFEN** and **ADVIL**, can cause damage to the small intestine if used for more than three months. Ibuprofen has also recently been linked to increased risk of heart attack.

Naturally arthritis suffers are worried and, unsurprisingly, they're looking for alternatives.

IN A NUTSHELL

If you suffer from osteoarthritis, *it may be worth considering glucosamine. There's now good research-based evidence that it's a safe and effective treatment, based on doses of 1500 mg of glucosamine sulphate or hydrochloride per day. Smaller doses may not have the same effect.*

When we tested 10 leading *brands we found many of them contained less glucosamine than claimed on the label. The dose recommended on the bottle might not give you enough glucosamine to be sure of it doing you any good.*

PHOTOS:GENE BOSS

Alternative alternatives

We also had a look at some other popular alternatives, but none of them has been as thoroughly investigated as glucosamine. Some may improve your mobility, others may only relieve the pain (or, of course, they may do neither).

Chondroitin sulphate. Like glucosamine, this is a natural substance found in the body (it's a component of cartilage). While there have been fewer trials of this than of glucosamine, there's evidence that chondroitin sulphate can reduce pain and improve function in people suffering from osteoarthritis.

Chondroitin sulphate's often sold in combination with glucosamine. While some studies suggest this combination is more effective than either of them taken alone, the evidence isn't conclusive. What's more, in a combination form it's possible you'll be taking too low a dose of either substance for it to be effective, so some practitioners recommend taking one or the other.

If you avoid animal products, be aware that chondroitin is usually extracted from animal cartilage, such as cows' windpipes.

Capsaicin. A cream that's applied topically to the skin, this is currently off the Australian market, mostly due to production problems, though it's still available in New Zealand. In one double-blind study, capsaicin was

THE EVIDENCE FOR GLUCOSAMINE

Glucosamine is a component of much larger molecules found in the body called glycosaminoglycans. These larger molecules are involved in the formation and repair of cartilage, and are major constituents of bones, ligaments, tendons and the synovial fluid that lubricates our joints.

The evidence that glucosamine is an effective treatment for osteoarthritis is very much stronger than for other 'alternative' treatments (see *Alternative alternatives*, below). It's been used for more than 20 years and during this time 16 randomised controlled trials have shown that it's both effective and safe in the short term. It not only relieves the symptoms of osteoarthritis — particularly in the knee — but may help reverse the disease's progress.

It also compares well with conventional pain relief, with trials showing it's at least as effective as paracetemol and the NSAID ibuprofen.

The Australian government has funded a major research project to look at the cost-benefits of glucosamine, which could eventually lead to it being considered for the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme.

As yet no trials have been long enough to gauge its long-term effects or any possible toxicity over many years. However, several trials have shown it's safe in the short term, well tolerated by most people and that it has fewer side effects than NSAIDs.

Relief from symptoms generally takes at least two to four weeks, but protection of joints only occurs after continuous use over several years.

LABEL LINGO

The labels on these supplements can be confusing because glucosamine comes in different chemical forms that contain different amounts of actual glucosamine. It can make a big difference to how much of the active ingredient you're actually taking.

1000 mg of **glucosamine hydrochloride** is equivalent to 830 mg of actual glucosamine and 1000 mg of **glucosamine sulphate** a little less (785 mg). But 1000 mg of **glucosamine sulphate/potassium chloride complex** delivers only 590 mg of glucosamine. (And once you've swallowed the stuff its original chemical form appears to make little difference — it's absorbed into your bloodstream as glucosamine, regardless of which form you take.)

Most brands simply say 'Glucosamine 1000' and leave you to decipher the small print to find out which chemical form — and so how much actual glucosamine — you're getting. For examples of such confusing labels, see the photo, right.

The names of these two products clearly suggest each tablet contains 1000 mg of glucosamine sulphate. The small print, however, says it's 1000 mg of glucosamine sulphate/potassium chloride complex. If the latter is correct, you're in fact only getting 750 mg of glucosamine sulphate per tablet — well short of what you'd probably expect.

shown to be effective at relieving pain for both rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis. (If you're wondering where you've heard the name before, capsaicin is the substance responsible for the heat in chillies.)

- **Devil's claw.** Derived from a shrub that grows in southern Africa, the active ingredient is harpagoside, which has an anti-inflammatory effect. Two trials have found devil's claw can significantly reduce pain, but there are various reports of interactions with conventional medicines such as warfarin.
- **Avocado-soybean unsaponifiables.** This is an extract derived from one-third avocado oil and two-thirds soybean oil. While there have been conflicting results from the small number of published studies, two double-blind studies did find improvement in pain scores in patients taking it for a period of months. This treatment appeared to be more effective for people with osteoarthritis of the hip than of the knee.
- **New Zealand green-lipped mussel (lyprinol).** Derived from mussels that do indeed come from New Zealand, this product is available freeze-dried, concentrated or ground in capsules. More like an old-style anti-inflammatory, findings for it have been mixed, but some studies suggest that it may reduce inflammation, lubricate joints and reduce pain.
- **Acupuncture.** Research findings are again inconclusive, but two recent studies found that acupuncture played a modest role in helping boost the power of drugs to reduce the pain suffered by patients with osteoarthritis in their knees, and also helped improve their movement.
- **Thermotherapy** — treatment with cold packs. It's an inexpensive and easy method of managing osteoarthritis, but again the evidence for any benefit is limited. Cold packs can reduce swelling of the knees and improve movement but don't seem to relieve pain significantly.
- **Electromagnetic therapy.** Treating osteoarthritis using pulsed electric stimulation has been growing in popularity. While there hasn't been enough rigorous research done in this area, three double-blind clinical trials have suggested that electromagnetic stimulation therapy might reduce pain, particularly in the knee, and may also improve the joint's function.

WHAT WE FOUND

Most clinical studies to date have shown that 1500 mg of glucosamine sulphate/hydrochloride taken each day can have a significant effect. It's not known whether smaller doses will give any significant benefit, though a minimum of 1000 mg/day is often recommended on the labels.

We checked the amount of glucosamine per tablet/capsule in one bottle each of 10 brands that you can find in supermarkets, pharmacies and healthfood stores.

Only three brands (**HERRON**, **NATURE'S OWN** and **NATURE'S WAY**) contained within 10% of the amount of glucosamine per tablet that's claimed on the label. Some brands (**WAGNER PRO-BIOTICS**, **BLACKMORES** and **BIOGLAN**) were deficient by 20% or more. This has serious implications — if you take the minimum dose recommended on the label you won't be getting as much glucosamine as you think. And it's probably not enough to do you any good.

For some of the brands tested even the manufacturer's maximum recommended dose doesn't provide the daily amount of glucosamine sulphate/hydrochloride that clinical trials have shown to be effective.

If you buy any of the products in the top section of the table and take the maximum recommended dose, you should get enough. ■

1 **Brand** (in alphabetical order within groups)	Tablets or capsules?	Manufacturer's recommended daily dose	Glucosamine sulphate or glucosamine hydrochloride per tablet or capsule (mg) 2 Claimed	3 Measured	4 % difference (measured vs claimed)	5 Cost per max daily recommended dose (cents)
MAXIMUM DAILY DOSE MORE THAN 1500 mg (based on the measured amount of glucosamine sulphate/hydrochloride)						
BIOGLAN (A)	Tablets	1 to 2	1000	780	–22	52
BLACKMORES (B)	Capsules	1 to 2	1000	780	–22	42
HERRON (B)	Tablets	1 to 2	1000	1020	+2	51
NATURE'S WAY (C)	Tablets	1 to 2	1000	940	–6	64
PRETORIUS (A)	Tablets	1 to 2	1000	840	–16	66
MAXIMUM DAILY DOSE LESS THAN 1500 mg (based on the measured amount of glucosamine sulphate/hydrochloride)						
BIO-ORGANICS (C)	Capsules	2	750	640	–15	70
HERBS OF GOLD (C)	Tablets	1	1125	1000	–11	52
NATURE'S OWN (C)	Capsules	2	750	720	–4	36
NUTRA-LIFE (C)	Capsules	1 to 2	750	660	–12	66
WAGNER PRO-BIOTICS (C)	Capsules	1 to 2	750	540	–28	49

ALWAYS ASK YOUR DOCTOR

Always check with your doctor before taking glucosamine or any other 'alternative' product. It may interact with other medication you're taking.

Also, they haven't been tested on women who are pregnant or breastfeeding, and they may not be suitable for children.

Most glucosamine supplements are derived from material such as prawn shells, so if you have an allergy to shellfish be specially cautious. (Although some are made synthetically from glucose derived from maize starch, all the glucosamine products in this test are from marine sources.)

(A) *Glucosamine sulphate.*
(B) *Glucosamine hydrochloride.*
(C) *Glucosamine sulphate/potassium chloride complex. Claimed and measured figures in the table are for glucosamine sulphate/hydrochloride, which we calculated when it wasn't given on the label.*

1 Brand

For better comparability, we restricted the test to products that contain glucosamine only. You should be able to easily find these brands in supermarkets, pharmacies and the major healthfood stores. There are also many products on the market that contain glucosamine in combination with other substances, particularly chondroitin — see *Alternative alternatives*, page 24, for more on this.

2 Claimed

The amount of glucosamine sulphate or glucosamine hydrochloride per tablet or capsule claimed on the label. Where the amount stated is for glucosamine sulphate/potassium chloride complex only, we calculated the amount of glucosamine sulphate this contains.

3 Measured

Clinical trials have been done with both the sulphate and hydrochloride forms and they're approximately equivalent. We measured one sample from one batch of each brand; there may be batch-to-batch variations. The results are rounded to the nearest 20 mg.

4 Percentage difference (measured vs claimed)

The difference between the measured amount of glucosamine sulphate/hydrochloride per tablet or capsule and the amount claimed on the label.

5 Cost per maximum daily recommended dose

This is based on prices we paid in April 2005 and the maximum daily dosage recommended by the manufacturer.

There's a lot to consider when choosing a pet care service to mind your animal when you can't be there.

OUTSOURCED PET CARE

GENE ROSS

Holiday time, yay! So you've planned your holiday, researched your destination, booked the tickets and hotels, obtained visas, learnt a little local language, arranged airport transfers and car rental, sorted out access to currency, redirected mail, disconnected the car battery, made arrangements with the bank, set up your automatic light switches, put the radio on talkback, asked your neighbours to keep an eye on the house … and now you really *do* need that holiday. But for many pet owners, the biggest planning headache is what to do with Fido and Fluffy.

Unless you've a ready supply of willing and able friends and relatives, you're going to have to consider a commercial pet care service. In this article we look at the different kinds of care available, from boarding facilities to care in your own home, or the homes of others. We asked CHOICE readers to tell us their experiences with pet care services and how satisfied they felt overall (see *Pet care survey*, page 28). Each type of care has its advantages and disadvantages, and there's no clear winner. We received some horror stories, but most pets came home none the worse for their stay, even if not all had the happy experience hoped for or expected.

Ultimately the best type of care for your pet depends on your pet's nature and personality: gregarious, active animals have different needs to sedate loners. But it also depends on how good the care is: a friendly, well-run boarding facility is a better option than an unreliable or neglectful house sitter, even if Fluffy would really rather stay at home.

BOARDING FACILITIES

These include kennels, catteries and care provided by some veterinary practices. Some are better than others in terms of the amount of attention given, individual space and opportunity for exercise. It's important to shop around, but remember price isn't always an indicator of quality.

IN A NUTSHELL

- **There's no 'best' option** *for pet care — it depends both on the nature of your pet and the attributes of the particular minder or facility you choose.*
- **Shop around** *— take the time to compare facilities, services and prices.*
- **Word of mouth** *— friends, neighbours, colleagues and vets — may be your best bet for finding a good service.*
- **Get in early,** *especially during peak holiday times.*

Our dog owners paid an average of $24 a day, and cat owners $15 a day. However, prices varied enormously depending on extras (administering medication, exercise, bathing), duration (some have relatively high minimum payments for short stays), number of animals (you can sometimes get a discount for more than one pet) and location (city versus country).

In most states, there are no legal requirements regarding standards of pet boarding facilities, although they must be capable of ensuring that obligations under the various Acts concerning animal welfare and prevention of cruelty to animals are met. Some states have codes of practice for pet boarding facilities, which set out minimum requirements for housing, feeding, exercise, health and veterinary care, hygiene and security. However, except in Victoria, these codes aren't mandatory.

PET CARE SURVEY

In addition to asking people for details of their experiences, we also conducted a small survey to find out how popular various forms of pet care are, and how satisfied people were overall.

Of those who responded, the most popular form of care for dog owners was boarding facilities (31%), closely followed by staying in the home of friends or relatives (26%) or having a friend or relative housesit (24%).

Among cat owners, the most common form of care was having the cat stay home and a friend or relative pop in to feed it (42% — only 18% of dog owners used this option). Having a friend or relative housesit (26%) or having the cat boarded (23%) were a distant second and third.

Most people (around 80%) were 'very satisfied' with the care their pets received.

GENE ROSS

Kennels

We received many heartwarming stories of dogs returning from 'their holiday' happy and healthy, having enjoyed romps in the countryside and playing with other dogs.

For other dogs — and their owners — it can be a nightmare. We heard of incidents, ranging from the relatively minor to the more serious. The worst story we received involved a sleeping dog whose leg had inadvertently ventured through the fence, and was mauled by the dog in the next cage. The owners were called back on the second day of their holiday, and had to have their dog put down. The unsympathetic kennel owner refused to take any responsibility.

Other problems involved lack of exercise — it's not always clear that exercise time may be an optional extra, for which you pay. Then there's the definition of 'play': it could mean one-on-one time with a carer, getting lots of attention and affection; access to an exercise area alone or with one, two, six or 20 other dogs, perhaps supervised, perhaps not; or allowing your dog into a play area alone while their cage is cleaned, with no real impetus for active play.

The minimum recommendations for exercise spelt out in the codes of practice we looked at are access to an exercise area or walking a dog on a lead for at least 10 minutes, twice daily. Most people would probably expect their dog to get more than this. (Also see *Dog stacking*, page 31.)

Catteries

While many people were satisfied with the care their cats received in catteries, it seems cats don't get quite as good a deal as dogs when it comes to boarding. Perhaps it's reasoned that cats are smaller and less active than dogs — they sleep much of the day, and therefore need less space. Whatever the reason, cats tend to end up in fairly small, though perhaps multi-level cages. As one website put it, *"each run provides space and opportunity for isometric exercise"*!

The environment can be fairly dull, or even stressful if your cat doesn't like the close company of other cats. A few readers commented on some country facilities that consisted of cages within a large tin shed: cold in winter, hot in summer and no outside view or natural light.

Vet boarding

The main complaint about vets' boarding facilities was that the cages were very small — designed for animals recuperating from illness or surgery, rather than for

longer-term stays. It's worth checking if they'll spend any time out of the cage. While they may not get the attention and play space they'd like, at least you should be confident their basic needs will be met.

IN-HOME CARE

The main alternative to boarding, which may particularly suit people with cats, fish and/or caged animals, is having someone care for them in your home — by either moving into your house for the duration of your absence, or visiting once or twice a day to look after your pets and otherwise keep an eye on the house.

The potential benefits include that your pet stays in a comfortable, roomy and familiar environment, your garden and pot plants can also be cared for, and your home can look lived-in for increased home security. While a home visit service can cost as much as keeping one pet in a boarding facility, if you have several pets you'll come out ahead.

Potential drawbacks include lack of privacy, damage and neglect to your home and possessions and putting your faith in someone who may let you — and your animals — down. If you're using a home visit service, or even a house sitter who works long days, your pet might become bored and lonely, and get up to mischief.

A few people commented they'd had minders (usually friends or relatives) who weren't really animal-people, and while kind and well-intentioned, didn't look after the pets as well as they should because they didn't notice anything amiss.

The main problems our readers reported seemed to be that the people were unreliable: not turning up every day for feeding and attention, or not living in the house as per the agreement (for example, having two overlapping house-sitting arrangements, and spreading themselves a little thin).

Cats were fed only dry cat food (despite frozen 'fresh' food being left for them), and had been left with dry water bowls. Dogs weren't walked, and were starved of company due to the minder not being around as promised. Animals being overfed was just as much a problem as being underfed — ask anyone who's put their pet on a long-term weight-reducing diet, only to see the effects blown in a few weeks. And one minder replaced (presumably …) a dead goldfish with a Siamese fighting fish. It's rather lonely!

Reported fees for home visits were around $20 per day, with dog walking sometimes attracting an extra fee.

CARE IN THE HOME OF OTHERS

Several satisfied customers wrote to us about an almost-national franchise called **Don't Fret Pet**. A carer takes your dog to live with them — as a part of their household. Fees charged are around $28-35 a day, varying by peak and off-peak periods. You also provide all food and equipment.

Sometimes the carers are people who love dogs but don't want the commitment of owning one. Sometimes they are animal lovers with pets of their own, happy to help others out. The carer themselves only gets $6 of your daily fee — so they're not in it for the money. The rest covers public liability insurance and workers compensation, as well as administration.

If something happens to the original carer while you're away, and they can no longer look after your dog, the franchisee will find an alternative carer (or take the dog in themselves) — so you won't be left in the lurch. There are franchises in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide, Canberra, the Gold Coast and Cairns.

We also had readers who were very happy with independent operators who offered a similar service. While these tended to be cheaper, there may be a problem if something happens and they're no longer able to look after your dog.

THANK YOU

Thanks to everyone who wrote to us with their stories — they were invaluable when compiling this article. Particular thanks go to the following, whose stories and advice we've included: Ariel Endean, Bonnie MacDonald, Christine Bray, Jean Porter, Jodie Ricardo, Kate Stevens, Ken and Carol Phillips, Maria Smith, Melanie Maybury, Peter Gibson, Robyn Smith, Sally Young, Sandy O'Keefe and Sonja Morgan.

DOG WALKING AND DOGGY DAY CARE

See our website (www.choiceextra.com.au) for info about and tips on choosing dog walking and day care services. Look under 'Pet care services' in the index.

Pet care tips when ...

... CHOOSING A BOARDING FACILITY

Where to start

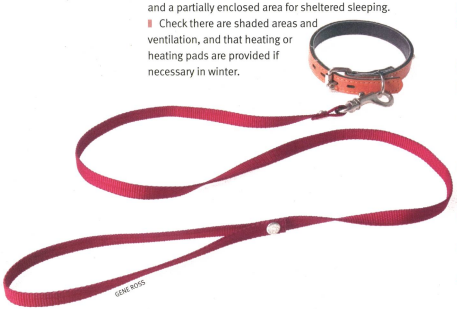
- Start looking well before your holiday.
- Try word of mouth — ask your work colleagues, vet, the breeder who sold you your pet, fellow dog walkers.
- Look at several different places — what's good for some animals may not suit yours.
- Check them out in advance: we heard stories where readers had booked facilities unseen, only to be disappointed or horrified when they dropped their pets off on their way to the airport, when it was too late to change plans. Likewise, if you're taking advantage of a boarding facility's pick-up and drop-off service, make sure you've checked it out first.
- Book early, especially for care during peak periods when the best places will fill up quickly.

Formalities

- Checklists to complete with things like your contact details, a full description of the animal, individual requirements (medical, dietary, bathing, grooming), vet's details, up-to-date vaccinations, worm treatment and flea prevention, weight on arrival, collars, toys, bedding and other equipment you bring, and likes and dislikes indicate the operators are interested and organised.
- Find out when pick-up and drop-off times are, and how they tie in with your travel plans.
- It's a good idea to leave contact details for a family member or friend who can make decisions about your pet's care.

Accommodation

- Runs should offer protection from wind and rain, and a partially enclosed area for sheltered sleeping.
- Check there are shaded areas and ventilation, and that heating or heating pads are provided if necessary in winter.



- Dogs should have beds raised off the ground, especially in winter.
- Cats should have bedding provided.
- Are there toys, scratching posts and other positive forms of stimulation?
- Pens should look and smell clean. Concrete may not look very cosy and comfortable, but it's easy to keep clean.
- Views to the outside world can help prevent boredom, particularly for cats.
- Is the cattery adjacent to kennels? Some cats might find the constant barking of dogs stressful.

Health and veterinary care

- Kennels should check your dog has been fully vaccinated (C_5 or C_6), and is up to date with heartworm, gastrointestinal worm and flea prophylactics.
- Cats should be fully vaccinated against feline enteritis and the viruses which cause feline respiratory disease (F_3).
- Animals suspected of, or known to be suffering from, an infectious condition shouldn't be accepted.
- What arrangements are in place if your pet becomes ill? Do you want your own vet to be consulted in case of any treatment that has to be given by the boarding facility's vet? Decide your preferences well in advance and make your wishes known.
- Various codes of practice state that dogs under three or four months and cats under three months shouldn't be admitted for overnight boarding, other than in exceptional circumstances.

Food

- What sort of food is your pet given? Are you happy with the type and quality of food? Is it radically different from their normal diet?
- Are special dietary needs catered for?
- If your pet goes off their food, due to stress or loneliness, will the staff try to tempt them with some favourites?

Staffing and carers

- When you're shopping around, try to meet the people responsible for handling and caring for the animals, not just the office staff. Use the opportunity to see how they relate to your pet, and vice versa. Try to gauge whether they're in it for the love of animals or just the money.
- Ask lots of questions, and if the answers are vague or glib, go elsewhere. If they ask *you* lots of questions, that's a good sign they're interested in your pet.
- If they seem annoyed by your requests, such as dietary requirements, they may not carry them out.
- It's a good sign if they pay as much — or more — attention to your pet as to you.
- Is there someone on the premises after hours? If not, what

are the arrangements for after-hours care and supervision?

If you're using vet boarding, who will be looking after your pet, especially if it's over the weekend or out of surgery hours?

Owners assume — and are often assured — that their pets will get plenty of pats and cuddles, but it's a good idea to establish how much individual time is devoted to them each day.

Exercise

Don't just assume your dog will be exercised, especially for short periods of boarding (less than two weeks). Make sure you know what 'exercise' and 'play' involve, as well as how long and at what (extra) cost.

Are dogs of all types and sizes allowed in the yard at one time? How many? Are they supervised?

Is the exercise yard free of bushes that might attract ticks? Are there other hazards? Wire mesh sheeting (sometimes used to protect grass) can catch your dog's foot if running or jumping — knee joints are very delicate.

For large dogs especially, consider kennels in the country. Some of our readers reported their dogs had an absolute ball in the country, with lots of room to run around and swims in dams or creeks. Better-behaved dogs were even taken around with the farmer doing daily chores (mending fences, collecting the mail, etc).

If cats are given access to an exercise area, for how long is it, is it individual time or shared with other cats, and is it supervised?

... CHOOSING AND USING IN-HOME CARE

For what it's worth, ask potential carers to get a police check, and ask for (and follow up) references. However, these don't really mean much: people don't report unwatered plants, unwalked dogs, overflowing letterboxes and a messy house to the police; references can be faked; and referees may be friends who've been suitably briefed.

When you meet potential pet minders, see how they interact with your pet — and your pet with them. If you have a large and/or lively dog, can they handle them?

Provide the carer with a map of preferred walks and parks, and also provide any details about on- and off-leash parts of walks, and any local friends or enemies that may be encountered on the way.

Make sure you let the carer know the house rules (sitting on furniture, sleeping arrangements), how pets are disciplined and a list of words and commands the animal knows and responds to (for toileting, bed, walks, etc).

Apart from leaving your vet's details, it's also useful to leave the contact details for a friend or relative who can make decisions about your pet's welfare and general household matters and lend a helping hand if necessary. It might also be useful to give that person a spare set of keys.

Establish up front who pays for what — if you're not paying the house sitter, you may agree to pay some of the bills. You should also negotiate some kind of bond, paid in advance, to cover damages.

Leave some money to cover food and any small unexpected expenses, such as medications, for your pet, and negotiate how you'll settle larger expenses such as a plumbing emergency. Arrange with your vet to settle accounts on your return.

Several people commented that their cat litter tray wasn't properly cleaned out. Because it's not easy to convince pet sitters to dig around for solids and clumped urine, one reader simply provided enough litter and liners to replace all the litter every day.

Emphasise the importance of having fresh water available for your pets, especially if the minders aren't pet owners themselves.

DOG STACKING

A largely unknown issue — at least among dog *owners* — that emerged in our research is that of joint boarding, or 'dog stacking'. This is where the kennel owner puts two or more unfamiliar dogs into the one run. Sometimes it's sold to you as giving your dog a fun playmate — after all, dogs are pack animals. Sometimes you're not told at all — they just do it. It's more likely to occur during peak periods, when demand for places is higher.

Potential problems include weight loss or weight gain due to competition for food, psychological problems (nervousness, anxiety), injuries resulting from fighting and illness resulting from lack of attention (things aren't picked up due to too many dogs and not enough staff). Yes, dogs are pack animals, but they're also competitive animals, and packs are based on dominance hierarchies.

Problems are compounded when a kennel accepts, say, double the number of dogs as runs, and some dogs prove completely incompatible with others and have to be kept on their own. This means three or more dogs end up together. And you're unlikely to get a reduction in fees — it's about income, not concern for your dog's loneliness.

The ACT and Victorian Codes of Practice for boarding animals says dogs can only be joint-boarded with specific (written) permission of owners; the NSW code says that dogs 'should preferably be housed singly, or in compatible pairs'.

Is it all bad? If the dogs are well-matched and their feeding and bedding aren't compromised, joint boarding could well be satisfactory, and some dogs will love it. However, it's more likely that at best your dog will merely tolerate it; at worst they'll really suffer. The important thing is to know in advance what the situation is so you make an informed decision.

Signs that a kennel may use joint boarding include not letting you inspect the kennels during peak period, or that it won't take large or aggressive dogs, or dogs that haven't been desexed because they're less suitable for joint boarding.

If you're concerned, it might be best to ask directly about dog stacking: "Will Fido have his own run, or will he be paired up with another dog?"

Straight to the point

Sleek, salon-straight hair can be yours everyday — for a price.

PHOTOS: GENE ROSS

IN A NUTSHELL

- **On test:** *13 hair straighteners ranging from $30 to $299.*
- **The straighteners that** *rated best tended to cost over $100, but you can still get a good one for less (see* What to buy, *below).*
- **Models that heat up** *quickly — and therefore recover and maintain heat while you're straightening your hair — gave the best results.*

Gone are the days when curls, kinks and waves are ironed out, head on the ironing board, at risk of singeing and burns, all for the sake of smooth, straight hair. Nor do you have to fork out a fortune for harsh, chemical straightening at the hairdresser. Hair straighteners claim to deliver straight, silky locks with minimal fuss, so we put 13 to the test to find out which give the best results.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD ONE?

The best straighteners on trial:

- Straightened hair relatively **quickly.** For example, it took trialists 12 minutes on average to straighten their hair using the **GHD**, compared with 21 minutes using the **CONAIR.**
- Gave **lasting results. SUNBEAM Defrizz** results lasted just 1–4 hours, compared with 9–12 hours for many of the other straighteners.
- **Moved smoothly** through the hair.
- Were **easy to manoeuvre and handle.**

Possibly the most important feature of a good straightener — and a feature common to the six top straighteners in our trial — is a **quick heat-up** time. This has two main benefits:

- **Convenience.** You don't have to wait as long before you can start straightening.
- **Heat maintenance.** Each time you pull a straightener through hair, the plates will transfer some heat to the hair, so a quick recovery — indicated by a quick heat-up time — is important for good results.

However a quick heat-up time doesn't *guarantee* good results. The **CONAIR** didn't rate as well as others with a similarly quick heat-up time — possibly because its very narrow plates aren't in contact with hair long enough to transfer adequate heat for effective straightening.

WHAT TO BUY

Excellent	
GHD Professional Hairstyling Iron	$299
Good (in alphabetical order)	
ARIA ProMini Ceramic ZX614-A	$90
BABYLISS PRO Ceramic BAB2558MPA	$145
SILVER BULLET Lightning ES2000	$260
VIDAL SASSOON Thermaglass VS2161A	$140
WAHL Cutek MHC-100	$70

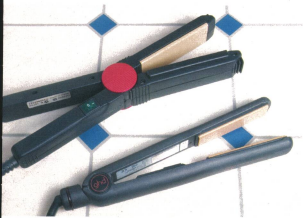
FEATURES TO CONSIDER

Some of the straighteners had more features than others, but this didn't necessarily give them an advantage (**GHD** — the best performer — has few bells and whistles).

- **Detachable combs**: Some straighteners come with combs. The purpose of these is to variously "guide hair through the plates, and hold taut while straightening", give "a softer finish to your style, with more volume" and "keep hair smooth and free of tangles." Some trialists found them useful, but others found that they caused hair to snag — so it's worth trying both ways to see what works best for you.
- **Adjustable heat settings**: Most of our trialists tended to end up using the maximum temperature setting available for straighteners with adjustable heat settings. However, a product with adjustable heat settings would probably suit people with delicate or fine hair, where a lower temperature setting is usually recommended.

Other things to consider before you buy:

- **Plate size:** Most of the straighteners in the trial had slim to medium-sized plates, suitable for most hair types. Wider plates may speed up the straightening process, particularly for those with longer hair.
- **Control buttons:** Some trialists commented that it was easy to accidentally switch off straighteners that had buttons on the outside, so bear this in mind when you're comparing models.
- **Scissor or tong style:** The two scissor models on trial — the **MÜSTER** and **VIDAL SASSOON Professional** — came in equal bottom for ease of use. They both have wide plates and are comparatively heavy but it may be that the scissor style is more awkward to use. It could be worth checking what feels comfortable for you before you buy.



The best straighteners on trial were all tong style (bottom). The scissor style models (top) were thought to be particularly hard to use.

Straightening with ions

Most of the hair straighteners on trial were ceramic/ceramic coated. It's claimed that ceramic straighteners eliminate frizz and leave hair smooth, shiny and silky using 'ioniser technology'. The theory is that the straightener generates a flow of negative ions that:

- Attach to and reduce the size of water vapour particles from the air that have settled on the hair (when it's humid, for example). This allows the hair shaft to absorb more moisture, which hydrates and conditions the hair.
- Reduce static electricity, flattening the hair shaft to produce a smooth, shiny surface.

It sounds compelling, but there's little evidence either to prove or disprove that it improves results. Our trial shows that ceramic plates certainly don't guarantee you good results, and other materials may be equally, if not more, effective (the only non-ceramic straightener tested, the **VIDAL SASSOON Thermaglass**, is in our top six). So it's worth looking at all your options before you buy.

The trial

Over five weeks, 10 experienced hair straightener users tested each of the 13 straighteners. The trialists were all women, most with medium to long hair that was generally medium to thick, and wavy.

Trialists used the straighteners in the morning (so they could determine how long the effect lasted throughout the day) on clean hair which was dry and tangle-free. Detachable combs were initially used if supplied, but trialists could remove them if they hindered performance. Aside from these specific instructions, trialists were told to follow the instructions and user guides provided by manufacturers.

To reduce variables, all the straighteners were trialled without the use of additional styling products (such as 'serums' and sprays). The **GHD** is supplied with **GHD Iron Oil** spray, so trialists tested this straightener both with and without it. The results were practically identical for both conditions. For the purpose of this article, we've only reported on results where no styling products were used.

We recorded daily relative humidity throughout the trial to check that it didn't significantly affect trialists' evaluations of the straighteners.

A good straightener can make a world of difference. This shows the immediate straightening effect after using the GHD (top) and the Sunbeam Defrizz (right).

Profiles

The models in the *What to buy* list are profiled below in alphabetical order (left to right) within rating categories. Prices are recommended retail, as supp

GHD PROFESSIONAL HAIRSTYLING IRON

Price: $299
Rating: Excellent

FEATURES

- 'On' indicator light.

GOOD POINTS

- Rated best for immediate straightening effect.
- Moved very smoothly through hair.
- Required the fewest applications on each section of hair for results.
- Rated best for ease of use.
- Very fast to preheat.

BAD POINTS

- Most expensive in the trial.

TRIALIST COMMENTS

- "It gives a great result, salon-straight hair."
- "Too expensive — but very good."
- "This is the best product I've tried. It's easy to use, heats quickly, doesn't snag and straightens fast in one to two goes. The plates meet flat and no extra pressure is needed. It really calms and straightens hair."

ARIA PROMINI CERAMIC ZX614-A

Price: $90
Rating: Good

FEATURES

- 'On' indicator light.
- 'Ready-to-use' indicator light.
- Variable temperature settings.
- Detachable combs.

GOOD POINTS

- Good immediate straightening effect.
- Easy to use.
- One of the two cheaper models in the *What to buy* list.

BAD POINTS

- Movement through the hair not always smooth — hair snagged sometimes.

TRIALIST COMMENTS

- "Hair seemed smoother and the straightener easy to use without the combs. Quite a good result."
- "Hair didn't move very smoothly through the plates. Hair was left dry and a bit rough."

BABYLISS PRO CERAMIC BAB2558MPA

Price: $145
Rating: Good

FEATURES

- 'On' indicator light.
- Variable temperature settings.

GOOD POINTS

- Good immediate straightening effect.
- Easy to use.

BAD POINTS

- Its straightening effect lasted a shorter time on average than the other models profiled (5–8 hours, rather than 9–12).

TRIALIST COMMENTS

- "Got hair very straight and smooth very easily — excellent result. Gives no signal when it's hot enough to use, but seemed to get there quite fast anyway."
- "Buttons inside were a real plus. Casing heats up a bit too much."

WHAT ABOUT THE REST?

The remaining seven straighteners were all rated worse than the recommended models for their immediate straightening effect, and most for their ease of use. The **MÜSTER** and the **VIDAL SASSOON Professional** (the two scissor models on trial) were thought to be particularly hard to use. The **SUNBEAM Defrizz, MÜSTER** and **CONAIR** received the lowest ratings for immediate straightening effect.

Hair care

Hair can withstand high temperatures if it's in good condition, but if you regularly use a straightener, it can easily become dry and brittle if you don't look after it properly. Follow these suggestions to keep your hair in good condition and avoid potential damage:

- Make sure you have enough protein and iron in your diet. Proteins account for about 97% of the structure of our hair, and 15–20% of our protein intake is used for skin and hair replacement. A low iron level is a common underlying cause of thinning hair in women.
- Use a good shampoo and conditioner. Avoid harsh shampoos, such as ones that contain large amounts of sodium laureth sulphate — it's a cheap foamer that strips fatty acids, moisture and amino acids from hair, which increases dryness and disturbs the healthy growth process of new hair.
- If you've got fine or thin hair, use lower heat settings.
- Preferably don't use a straightener every day. Hair in good condition is very strong, but will dry out. The moisture level of hair is about 10%, but daily straightening will reduce this.
- Avoid using a hair straightener if you bleach or regularly highlight your hair. These treatments make your hair more brittle, and using a hot straightener will only damage it further.

anufacturers in May 2005.

SILVER BULLET LIGHTNING ES2000

Price: $260
Rating: Good

FEATURES

- Digital temperature display.
- 'On' indicator light via digital display.
- Variable temperature settings.
- Sold with separate comb and hair clips.

GOOD POINTS

- Very good immediate straightening effect.
- Moved very smoothly through hair.
- Very easy to use.
- Very fast to preheat.

BAD POINTS

- None to mention.

TRIALIST COMMENTS

- "Very effective and very easy to use — small, light, glides very smoothly through hair. A bit easier than other straighteners for hot parts to touch ears, neck, etc."
- "I liked the temperature gauge, you could see it heating, I felt confident it was holding at the right temperature."

VIDAL SASSOON THERMAGLASS STRAIGHTENER VS2161A

Price: $140
Rating: Good

FEATURES

- 'On' indicator light.
- Variable temperature settings.
- Detachable combs.
- Stand.

GOOD POINTS

- Good immediate straightening effect.
- Easy to use.

BAD POINTS

- None to mention.

TRIALIST COMMENTS

- "The combs made it much easier for the straightener to move through the hair. This also allowed the straightener to emit the heat evenly to the strands of hair, leaving a more uniform finish."
- "It gives a great result."

WAHL CUTEK MHC-100

Price: $70
Rating: Good

FEATURES

- 'On' indicator light.

GOOD POINTS

- Good immediate straightening effect.
- Very easy to use.
- Very fast to preheat.
- One of the two cheaper models in the *What to buy* list.

BAD POINTS

- None to mention.

TRIALIST COMMENTS

- "Very good price, excellent results."
- "Very easy to use. Seems very hot, glides through hair smoothly and easily, but still had some trouble getting hair completely straight."

* *Prices are recommended retail rounded to the nearest dollar, as supplied by manufacturers in May 2005.*

(A) *Only sold in salons. For details of your nearest stockist, go to the ghd Hair website at www.ghdhair.com/au or call 1300 880 209.*

(B) *This model is being superseded, but you should still be able to find it in shops.*

1 Brand / model rating categories

Trialists rated each straightener overall using a scale ranging from 0,'very poor', through 5, 'OK', to 10, 'excellent'.

'Borderline' sits between 'OK' and 'poor'. There's also a 'very good' category (between 'good' and 'excellent'), but none of the straighteners fell into this.

Trialists also evaluated the straighteners for:

- **Straightening performance** (immediate straightening effect; how long the results lasted; smoothness through hair; number of applications required to straighten a given section of hair; and whether the plates were hot enough).
- **User-friendliness** (overall ease of use; heat-up time; handling and manoeuvrability).

1 **Brand / model** (in alphabetical order within overall rating categories)	Type	Price ($)*
EXCELLENT		
GHD Professional Hairstyling Iron **(A)**	Tong	299
GOOD		
ARIA ProMini Ceramic ZX614-A **(B)**	Tong	90
BABYLISS PRO Ceramic BAB2558MPA	Tong	145
SILVER BULLET Lightning ES2000	Tong	260
VIDAL SASSOON Thermaglass Straightener VS2161A	Tong	140
WAHL Cutek MHC-100	Tong	70
OK		
BREVILLE Avanti Professional Ceramic Hair Straightener BHS710	Tong	70
CONAIR Ultra Slim Straightener C2026A	Tong	30
REMINGTON Thermo Ceramic Professional Straightener S5001	Tong	84
SUNBEAM Salon Finish Hairstyling Iron with Ceramic Technology HS9500	Tong	150
BORDERLINE		
MÜSTER Top Professional Ceramika MU24588	Scissor	109
SUNBEAM Salon Finish Defrizz Straightener with Ceramic Plates HS7800	Tong	80
VIDAL SASSOON Professional Solid Ceramic Straightener VS2047CA	Scissor	80

PHOTOS: GENE ROSS

Recording to disc may give a clearer picture, but are DVD recorders easy to use?

THE MORE THINGS CHANGE...

IN A NUTSHELL

- **DVD image quality** *is dependent on how much you put on the disc, but generally it's very good to excellent.*
- **Multiple formats** *add confusion and can limit usefulness.*
- **Ease of use** *is the major difference overall.*

The humble VCR remains with us, but if yours is getting tired, or you're looking to upgrade, the swap to a DVD recorder is looking more affordable.

DVDs take up a lot less space than VHS cassettes and some DVD recorders have features like timeslip and almost instant bookmark searching (see *What to look for*, right) that a VCR will never manage. DVD discs are also more robust than tapes, so they're easier to store and look after. If you're into video you can use a DVD recorder to store your precious tapes on disc or make copies for your friends and family. Look for one that has a DV camera input in the table on page 38.

The image quality for all the recorders in this test was excellent or very good, when set to one or two hours of recording per disc. They start to get closer to what we're used to with a VCR at the longer recording times, but even at six hours they're still delivering an OK picture.

FORMAT FOLLIES

The types of DVD format supported by your DVD recorder for copy and playback are important if you intend to play your recorded DVDs on friends' DVD players. The most common formats are **DVD–R**, **DVD–RW**, **DVD+R**, **DVD+RW**. There's also a Panasonic-format **DVD RAM**, but it's physically different from the others and not always supported by non-Panasonic products.

We've listed the formats the products in this test use to record in the table on page 38. However, they tend to be more forgiving when it comes to playing back a recorded disc. All can play both **DVD +/–R** and **+/–RW** except the **SAMSUNG**, which can only play **–R/RW** and **RAM**. The **PANASONIC'S** instructions say it'll only play **–R** or **RAM**, but we found it could also play **–RW** and **+R/RW** as well as the sound-only format, **DVD Audio**.

WHAT TO BUY

PIONEER DVR-320-S	$525
NEC NDR-50	$479
PANASONIC DMR-E55GN	$550

What to look for

Remote controls should have buttons that are sized, shaped and spaced so you can easily find and press them individually. They should be grouped so you can quickly go to specific functions, and the most commonly used buttons should be prominent. All should have clear English labels or obvious symbols.

Onscreen menus should be large and easy to read, with a logical structure, so you don't have to resort to the manual to find settings and functions.

Written instructions should be detailed enough so you can easily set up and use the unit. Clear descriptions and pictures are often very useful, particularly if you're connecting to a number of other devices.

Timeslip, timeshift or chase play are all names applied to a useful function that frees you from waiting for a recording to finish before you watch it. In most cases, you just hit the pause button while you answer the phone or make a cuppa. Then, when you're ready, you hit play and the recorder plays from that point while continuing to record ahead. It also allows you to do your own instant replay. With timeslip on, if you missed that last brilliant tennis shot you just press the back button and watch it, then fast forward to the current play and you don't miss a thing. And if you come home halfway through a show you're recording, you can watch it from the beginning while it records the end.

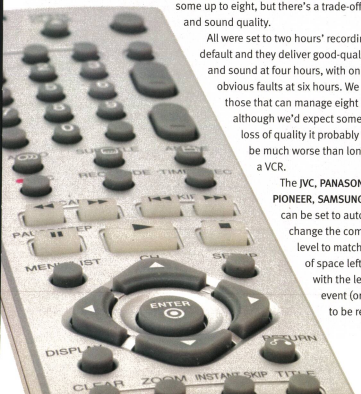
Bookmarking allows you to set markers at spots in the recording that you want to return to later. It could be handy for finding a particular song in a concert, or your footy team's winning try.

The **number of recording events/types** should match your normal recording patterns. Check not only how many events you can set but also what type — once only, daily, weekly or by date and time.

Compression levels allow you to fit more on a DVD. All the products in this test can manage up to six hours of recording at maximum compression and some up to eight, but there's a trade-off in picture and sound quality.

All were set to two hours' recording as a default and they deliver good-quality picture and sound at four hours, with only minor obvious faults at six hours. We didn't test those that can manage eight hours, and although we'd expect some further loss of quality it probably wouldn't be much worse than long-play on a VCR.

The **JVC, PANASONIC, PIONEER, SAMSUNG** and **SONY** can be set to automatically change the compression level to match the amount of space left on a disc with the length of the event (or program) to be recorded.



DVD connections may look complicated, but you should only need to deal with them once when setting up.

Features they (almost) all have

Composite video, S-Video, component video (except **MAGNAVOX**), stereo audio and digital audio outputs. Composite connections are the most basic picture link to the TV, while S-video gives better-quality images. Component is better again and is becoming more common with modern TVs.

Composite video, S-Video (except **NEC**) and stereo audio inputs at the rear.

Composite video, S-Video (except **MAGNAVOX**) and stereo audio inputs at the front that are independent of the ones at the rear.

Can play DVD Video, CD Audio, VCD, CD-R Audio and MP3, and CD-RW Audio and MP3.

Menu options for 4:3 letterbox, 4:3 pan & scan, 16:9, camera angle, subtitle language and dialogue language (but the actual availability of the feature may depend on the disc being played).

Analogue tuner that allows automatic, manual tuning and manual fine tuning; and channel skip or its equivalent.

One-touch skip back to the start of the current DVD chapter or CD track (except **PALSONIC**).

Various playback and search speeds.

Simple, quick or one-touch recording, and timer recording with one, two, four and six hours recording capacity. Some can record times other than these as well and the **PIONEER** has a manual mode which has 32 settings between one and six hours.

Profiles

Models in the *What to buy* list are profiled in rank order. Prices are recommended retail as supplied by manufacturers in June 2005.

PIONEER DVR-320-S

Price: $525

GOOD POINTS

- Best overall and for ease of use.
- Consumes an extremely small amount of energy on standby.
- Progressive scan (see *Features*, right).
- Timeslip (see *What to look for*, page 37).
- G-code.
- The recorder can be set to decide the recording quality (see *What to look for*).
- Unit lock to prevent unauthorised use.
- Remote control can also be used with some TVs.

BAD POINTS

- Had some difficulty playing our faulty DVD.

NEC NDR-50

Price: $479

GOOD POINTS

- Played our faulty DVD without difficulty.
- Very good recording quality.
- Digital video (DV) input.
- Picture in picture (PIP) lets you watch one channel and see another in a small section of the screen.
- Bookmarking lets you jump to a specific point during DVD playback.
- Supports many DVD formats.

BAD POINTS

- No S-video input at the rear.

PANASONIC DMR-E55GN

Price: $550

GOOD POINTS

- Can record on and play DVD-RAM discs.
- Can play DVD Audio discs.
- Progressive scan.
- Timeslip.
- G-code.
- Up to eight hours' recording capacity.
- The recorder can be set to decide the recording quality.
- Unit lock
- Remote control can also be used with some TVs.

BAD POINTS

- Had some difficulty playing our faulty DVD.
- Instructions state it can play only –R and RAM but we found it could also play our –RW, +R/RW test DVDs.
- No open/close key on the remote control.

Pioneer DVR-320-S

NEC NDR-50

Panasonic DMR-E55GN

* *Rounded up to next cm, all protruding parts except cord included.*

† *Prices are recommended retail as supplied by manufacturers in June 2005.*

(A) *DVD RAM disc has to be removed from cartridge.*

(B) *NTSC only.*

(C) *Only with DVD-RW ver.1.1/2x or ver. 1.2/4x.*

(D) *Only with DVD RAM.*

(E) *Also has component input at the rear.*

(F) *Extra two years free if you register.*

(G) *Extra two years $60, extra four years $90.*

(H) *Extra four years with free home pick-up service, $128.*

	PERFORMANCE				
Brand / model (in rank order)	**1 Overall score** (%)	**2 Ease of use score** (%)	**3 Picture recording and playback score** (%)	**4 Faulty disc playback score** (%)	**5 Standby energy consumption score** (%)
PIONEER DVR-320-S	78	79	72	75	100
NEC NDR-50	77	74	79	100	60
PANASONIC DMR-E55GN	76	75	75	75	80
PHILIPS DVDR615/69	72	61	76	100	70
PALSONIC DVD R 212	71	60	72	100	80
SONY RDR-GX300	71	72	72	80	50
BENQ JH300	70	65	73	100	50
SAMSUNG DVD-R100	70	73	72	80	40
MAGNAVOX MDVDR500+RW	69	66	73	80	50
JVC DR-M10SAA	68	62	75	80	50

WHAT ABOUT THE REST?

All the recorders in this test can produce good-quality recordings, but they aren't all equally easy to use.

The **SAMSUNG** has very good onscreen menus and is easy to tune. The **BENQ, JVC, MAGNAVOX, PALSONIC** and **PHILIPS** only score OK for on-screen menus. The **JVC** is the hardest to tune and organise frequently used channels.

The **SONY** and **NEC** remote controls are easy to use, but the **JVC, PALSONIC, PHILIPS** and **SAMSUNG** are only OK.

All the tested models handled our damaged CD with ease, but the faulty DVD posed some problems for the **JVC, MAGNAVOX, SAMSUNG** and **SONY** as well as the **PANASONIC** and **PIONEER** in the *What to buy* list.

1 Overall score

The sound quality of the recordings made by all the models tested was good and very similar; we found no serious faults. Therefore we only rated the models for ease of use (40%), recorded picture quality (40%), ability to cope with a damaged disc (10%) and standby energy consumption (10%).

2 Ease of use score

We performed various 'actual use' tasks following the instruction manuals. If a task could be done with little or no use of the instructions, the model scored better. We looked at the remote control (50%), onscreen indicators and menus (30%), front panel controls, and tuning and setting up frequently used channels (10% each). Recording and timeslipping were also appraised, but there was little or no difference in the former and only four products (see the table) can do the latter, so neither was included in the ease of use score.

3 Picture recording and playback score

We recorded a group of various test patterns, still pictures and motion pictures. Each group was recorded at one, four and six-hour settings using each product and the resulting quality of the image was scored as:

- One hour (20%)
- Two hour (60%)
- Six hour (20%)

4 Faulty disc playback score

To check how well the players can handle a both a CD and DVD disc with imperfections, we played our specially made test discs which have a range of simulated scratches and dirt. The scores for CD and DVD are equally weighted and the higher the score the less trouble the machine had playing the discs. None of the products in this test had any problem with the CD.

5 Standby energy consumption score

We measured the power each machine uses in standby mode or equivalent (when the machine's been turned off by the remote control but is still connected to power). The higher the score, the lower the energy consumption on standby.

6 Features

- **DVD formats** — those used for recording. See *Format follies*, page 36, for more on this.
- **Progressive scan** — normal CRT TVs produce the picture in two sets of lines tracing across the screen. This is called interlacing because the first set of lines is positioned 1, 3, 5, etc., and the second set fills in the gaps — 2, 4, 6, etc. Progressive scan allows the player to deliver the picture in one pass — 1, 2, 3, 4, etc, but you'll need a TV that supports progressive scan to get any benefit.
- **Timeslip** — you can watch the beginning of a recording while still recording the end (see *What to look for*, page 37).
- **G-code** — it can be very handy for recording programs providing they start and finish on time.
- **Maximum recording capacity** — the maximum number of recording hours that any one disc can contain. As the time increases the quality is likely to drop. See *What to look for* for more.
- **Number of recording events** — this is the total number of separate times you can set the recorder to record. Repeat recording, such as every Friday at 6 pm, is counted as one event. Y = up to one year ahead, M = up to one month ahead.

FEATURES								SPECIFICATIONS				
imed DVD mats	Progressive scan	Timeslip	G-Code	Max. recording capacity (hrs per disc)	Unit lock	Digital video (DV) input at the front	Number of recording events	Dimensions (H x W x D, cm)*	Warranty (years)	Origin	Manufacturer / distributor	Price ($)†
-RW	✓	✓ **(C)**	✓	6	✓		32 M	6 x 42 x 34	1 **(F)**	China	Pioneer	525
+RW, -R, -RW				6		4-pin	7 M	8 x 43 x 39	1	Korea	NEC	479
RAM	✓	✓ **(D)**	✓	8	✓		16 M	8 x 43 x 28	1 **(G)**	Japan	Panasonic	550
+RW			✓	8		4-pin **(E)**	6 M	7 x 44 x 30	1	China	Philips	499
+RW	✓			6		6-pin	20 Y	6 x 43 x 32	1	China	Palsonic	391
+RW, -R, -RW	✓ **(B)**		✓	6	✓		8 M	9 x 43 x 35	1 **(H)**	Japan	Sony	800
+RW	✓			6		4-pin	6 Y	7 x 43 x 35	2	Taiwan	BenQ	377
-RW, RAM		✓ **(C)**	✓	6		4-pin	12 M	7 x 43 x 27	1	Korea	Samsung	399
+RW				6		4-pin	6 Y	9 x 43 x 35	2	China	Prosignal	428
-RW, RAM **(A)**	✓	✓ **(C)**	✓	8	✓	4-pin	8 Y	7 x 44 x 35	1	China	Hagemeyer	550

Is duty-free worth it?

As much a holiday tradition as cocktails by the pool, does duty-free still offer good value?

IN A NUTSHELL

- **Duty-free shopping** *can still offer good value, but your destination's exchange rate with the Australian dollar affects prices — and so your savings — substantially.*
- **Make sure things** *like electronic goods and cameras come with a written worldwide warranty and suitable power specs for Australia.*

For years duty-free shopping was one of the perks of travelling overseas and substantial discounts could be had on a range of luxury goods from alcohol to watches to perfume. But on 1 July 2000, when the Goods and Services Tax (GST) was brought in, everything changed. With its introduction a whole raft of hidden taxes was phased out, including many of the wholesale taxes and import duties that used to make duty-free goods such good value.

So is duty-free shopping still worth it, or can you bag a better bargain just by shopping around here or at your destination?

We put this to the test by getting prices on a range of goods sold in duty-free shops in airports in Australia and popular destinations overseas, and comparing them to the prices we could get by shopping around here in retail shops, discounters and even eBay. These prices were surveyed in February and March this year.

COMPARISONS AREN'T EASY

Overall, overseas duty-free shopping can still offer you good value — but it depends on your destination. Singapore is hard to beat for most items, mainly because — at the time of writing — there was such a favourable exchange rate with the Australian dollar. This is the biggest factor affecting most price comparisons and, with most currencies now floated, the price you pay varies according to the exchange rate of the day.

Duty-free retailers also take note of the prices offered in other countries and adjust accordingly on a regular basis, so prices are constantly shifting. Overall, you need to be aware of how good the Australian dollar exchange rate is in the country you're visiting, and also be willing to spend the time shopping around both before you go and then overseas if you really want the best possible bargain.

Both alcohol and perfume are better value duty-free than buying in a retail store here, and perfume was also cheaper in all the overseas airports we checked except Auckland. For alcohol it isn't always easy to compare prices. Spirits tend to be sold in bigger bottles (sometimes with a higher alcohol level too) in duty-free shops, so it's hard to compare like with like, and overseas we also found packages that offered a good deal if you bought two bottles instead of one. While you'll pay less per millilitre, two bottles are of course still going to cost you more than one.

Comparing the prices worldwide of electronic goods like digital cameras and the **APPLE iPod** is also difficult. Because models are superseded so quickly (cameras seem to average roughly a six-month cycle) and are susceptible to demand, a model available in Australia may no longer be available overseas, or vice versa. Watches are also very hard to compare because not all shops stock exactly the same range. This means if you have your heart set on a particular model, you can't count on finding it everywhere.

BUYER BEWARE

Besides price and range, however, there's another argument for buying electronic goods in Australia — either duty-free or retail — rather than overseas: the warranty. Because warranties are administered via retailers, if you buy an item and it breaks down your first port of call is meant to be the shop that sold it to you. This is a problem if you bought while overseas and are now back home.

Some companies do offer a worldwide warranty service, which means a broker or retailer here may honour a warranty for something bought overseas, but you should check this carefully with the manufacturer, preferably before you travel. If you don't and you decide while overseas that there's something you really must have, the shop may well assure you that the warranty will be honoured back in Australia. But remember, you're getting advice from a shop that probably makes the bulk of its sales to transiting, rather than repeat, customers. At the very least make sure what you purchase comes with a written guarantee of the worldwide warranty and that there are written contact details for the company's service arrangements in Australia.

Buyers of electronic goods like computers may

also be hit with another problem. While the goods overseas may be cheaper, they may not be designed to run on the same voltage as the ones sold in Australia. This might mean you also have to buy a potentially bulky transformer to make it work, which eats into any savings you make. Once again, too, the warranty that comes with the appliance may not be a worldwide one. If you do want to make this sort of purchase, make sure you read the fine print of the specifications very carefully.

AIRPORTS VS NORMAL RETAIL

While we didn't directly compare prices from duty-free retailers in major shopping strips with duty-free shops in airports in Australia, the airport market here is largely dominated by one company, Downtown Duty Free. It told us it sets the same prices for goods in its shops regardless of where their location is, be it in an airport or retail strip and regardless of the city. We spot-checked a couple of items for this and found it to be mostly true.

What is available at airports also varies. Some places — like Shanghai — only have a limited range of duty-free goods in their airport, while others, like Singapore and London, offer an extensive range of duty-free shops.

GST-free

If you're travelling overseas you can even buy portable items (such as a digital camera) in a normal retail store before you leave, take them with you and claim a tax refund on them. Using the Australian Customs Services' Tourist Refund Scheme (TRS), you may be able to claim a refund of the GST, which applies to things like clothing, jewellery, shoes, cameras, small electrical goods and souvenirs, and of the wine equalisation tax (WET).

Refunds are subject to several conditions, including that you must:

- Have bought the goods no more than 30 days before your departure.
- Take the goods with you as carry-on luggage when you leave.
- Spend $300 or more in the one store and ask the retailer for a single tax invoice to cover all items.
- Present your passport, original tax invoice, international boarding pass and the goods to the Customs Officer at the TRS facility in your departure airport.

Remember, however, there are limits on the quantity of goods you're allowed to bring back into Australia duty and/or tax-free. Along with any duty-free items bought here before leaving and overseas, items bought under the TRS are included when determining your duty-free allowance. Goods for which a TRS claim has been approved must be declared to Customs on your return to Australia.

Prices at the airport duty-free shop (in price order, lowest to highest)

CHANEL NO 5 PERFUME (50 mL, in $A)

Hong Kong	64
Los Angeles	86
Singapore	86
Shanghai	87
London	93
Frankfurt	95
Amsterdam	98
Brisbane*	105
Melbourne*	105
Perth*	105
Sydney*	106
Auckland	122
Myer**	124
David Jones**	151

CANON DIGITAL IXUS 500 CAMERA (in $A)

Singapore	513
Brisbane*	629
Melbourne*	629
Perth*	629
Sydney*	629
Amsterdam	641
Myer**	699

APPLE iPOD (20 gigabyte, in $A)

Singapore	402
Brisbane	453
Melbourne*	453
Perth*	453
Sydney*	453
Amsterdam	488
Auckland	497
David Jones**	499
Myer**	499
London	542

MEN'S WATCH: TAG HEUER SERIES 2000 CLASSIC QUARTZ (in $A)

Singapore	821
Los Angeles	864
Melbourne*	1000
Sydney*	1000
Hong Kong	1032
Angus & Coote†	1090
David Jones**	1100
Frankfurt	1203
Amsterdam	2163

CHIVAS REGAL 12-YEAR-OLD SCOTCH (1 L, in $A)

Singapore	31
Hong Kong	32
Shanghai	34
Brisbane*	45
Melbourne*	45
Perth*	45
Sydney*	45
Los Angeles	46
London	48
Auckland	49
Amsterdam	51
Frankfurt	53
Liquorland**	73 (A)

ILLUSTRATIONS: MARK TREMLETT

Unless otherwise noted, prices are duty-free and rounded to the nearest Australian dollar. Some locations couldn't provide a price for every item when we enquired. Exchange rates calculated as of late February/early March 2005.

* *Downtown Duty Free at the airport.*

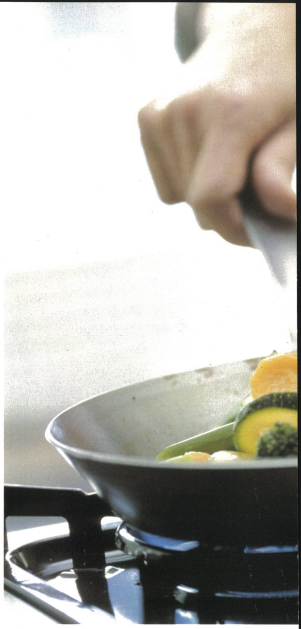
** *Sydney city, normal retail prices.*

† *Sydney airport, GST-free.*

(A) *Price per litre, based on a 700 mL bottle.*

It's a gas!

Cooking's a breeze with these cooktops.



IN A NUTSHELL

- **On test: 10 stainless** *steel, extra-wide, five-burner gas cooktops — all with a wok burner, and six with a fish/BBQ burner.*
- **Unless you're a culinary** *connoisseur or you cook for a large family, you won't need one this big.*
- **Two tested models** *don't have flame-failure protection — a safety feature* CHOICE *thinks all should have.*

These cooktops look pretty flash with their shiny stainless steel surfaces, five burners and cast iron or enamel trivets. They look like they're straight out of a commercial kitchen or Jamie Oliver's abode — and most cook as well as they look.

All the cooktops did reasonably well at cooking up a feast of beef and vegie stir-fry, rice and white sauce. And if you have problems when cooking, you can often make adjustments to improve the result.

On the other hand, you can't do much about a cooktop's layout or design — and some of those on test weren't great. Ideally you'd want both the simmer and wok burners at the front of the cooktop, so it's easier to stir a sauce or stir-fry, for example. The **ELECTROLUX CHEF, WESTINGHOUSE,** and **MIELE** models have the simmer burner behind the wok burner, making them harder to reach. The **KLEENMAID** and **FISHER & PAYKEL** have the best layouts; see *What about the rest?*, page 44, for more.

CAST IRON OR ENAMEL TRIVETS?

Cast iron trivets are heavier than enamel trivets, so they move around less when you're cooking and stirring — it's also easier to slide pots over them. But they're more likely to scratch the stainless steel hob surface so you'll have to be extra careful.

ANYONE FOR BBQ?

Six tested models have a fish/BBQ burner (see the table, page 44). It's an elongated multi-purpose burner that's great for poaching whole fish and for char-grilling steaks and vegies on a griddle plate placed on top.

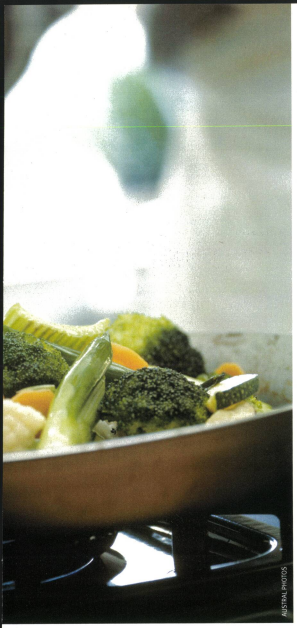
We cooked fatty steaks on a griddle plate to see how well and evenly the burners cook. Grease splashed over the entire cooktop and controls, making them difficult and time-consuming to clean. They also produced lots of smoke so a good rangehood is a must.

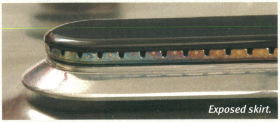
Although most cooktops cooked the steaks well, using an outdoor BBQ for greasy foods is a better and less messy option. Stick to char-grilling vegies, lean cuts of meat and poaching fish instead.

All the griddle plates (see the table for which models have one) are cast iron except the one supplied with the **AEG**. This is a relatively lightweight Teflon-coated griddle that didn't seem to get hot enough, which resulted in a low score for the **AEG** for cooking steaks. But this griddle is the only one with sides, which helped minimise the grease splatter. All cast iron griddle plates need to be seasoned before use to prevent rust and to stop food sticking.

WHAT TO BUY

WESTINGHOUSE GHL795S	◂TEST BUY▸	$1109
BOSCH NGT 915 IAU		$1249
MIELE KM 390 G		$1899

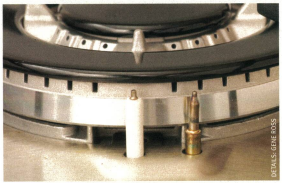




Exposed skirt.

Covered skirt.

Look for a burner skirt that's covered by the burner cap to minimise cleaning.



A cooktop with flame-failure protection will have two rods next to the burner.

SAFETY CONCERNS

Flame-failure protection is a device that automatically cuts the gas flow if the flame goes out or the burner doesn't ignite.

The **ELECTROLUX CHEF** and **WHIRLPOOL** tested (and some similar models of others tested) don't have this feature and so could be dangerous — particularly if children are about. The controls on these models only need to be pushed down slightly to be able to turn them and start the gas flow. The gas continues to flow after the control is released. Likewise if the flame gets blown out when cooking, such as when on simmer, the gas will continue to flow.

CHOICE thinks all models on the market should have flame-failure protection.

To check if a cooktop has flame-failure protection, look for two small rods sticking up next to the burner — one for the ignition system and one to detect the flame (see the photo, above right). They can be on opposite sides of the burner or hidden by the cap so you need to look closely.

For people with a disability

- For wheelchair users the **BOSCH** and **KLEENMAID** are best as their controls and simmer and wok burners are located at the front.
- If you have upper limb dysfunction the **WESTINGHOUSE** has large control knobs that need little pressure to ignite the burner. The **AEG** and **BLANCO** are easier to clean because their enamel trivets are lighter to lift. However, check the table footnotes (page 45) as some of the other models are also available with enamel trivets — for example, the **BOSCH NGT 915 HAU**, which also has flame-failure protection.
- People with poor vision need labelling that's easy to see. The **WESTINGHOUSE** is best.
- A gas cooktop is generally not recommended for someone with a cognitive impairment. But if you're going to choose one, make sure it has a flame-failure device. Clear and simple labelling is also needed — the **WESTINGHOUSE** is the best option.

Profiles

Models in the *What to buy* list are profiled. Prices are recommended or average retail as provided manufacturers in May/June 2005.

WESTINGHOUSE GHL795S

Price: $1109 BEST BUY

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent cooking scores for white sauce, stir-fry and steak.
- Hob surface is partitioned and sunken to contain spills.
- Easy to use controls.
- Relatively easy to clean.

BAD POINTS

- Burner layout not ideal — the simmer burner's behind the wok burner.

BOSCH NGT 915 IAU

Price: $1249

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent cooking scores for white sauce, stir-fry and steak.
- Well-positioned burners.
- Coffee pot and wok supports.

BAD POINTS

- Hob surface isn't partitioned to contain spills.
- Can be a little cramped if using all the burners at once.
- The burners have an exposed skirt that can be tricky to clean.

MIELE KM 390 G

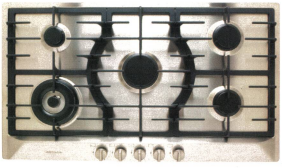
Price: $1899

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent cooking scores for white sauce, stir-fry and steak.
- Wok support.

BAD POINTS

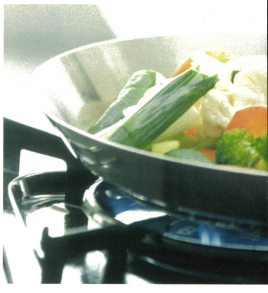
- Burner layout not ideal — the simmer burner's behind the wok burner.
- The controls are positioned at the front, making the simmer burner even more difficult to use.
- Hob surface is shallow and not partitioned to contain spills.
- Relatively expensive.



PROFILES: TAMARA GRAHAM

WHAT ABOUT THE REST?

- All the cooktops performed well overall and you'd probably be happy with any of them, particularly if you find them for a good price. However, we'd recommend getting one with flame-failure protection.
- The **BLANCO** earned excellent cooking scores for white sauce and stir-fry, and a very good score for steak. Its burners are well-positioned but the griddle plate doesn't fit well over the fish burner trivets and it has a shallow spill tray.
- The **FISHER & PAYKEL** was excellent for white sauce and stir-fry, has well-positioned burners and comes with coffee pot and wok supports. But the fish burner has an exposed skirt (hard to clean) and the hob surface is shallow and not partitioned to contain spills.

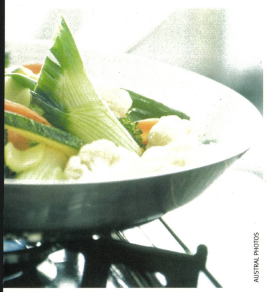


Brand / model (in rank order)	PERFORMANCE 1 Overall score (%)	2 Cooking score (%)	3 Ease of use score (%)	4 FEATURES Auto ignition	Fish burner	Griddle plate	SPEC Trive
WITH FLAME-FAILURE PROTECTION							
WESTINGHOUSE GHL795S **(A)**	84	91	76	Electric	✓	✓	Cast i
BOSCH NGT 915 IAU **(B)**	81	89	72	Electric	✓	**(J)**	Cast i
MIELE KM 390 G **(C)**	81	98	64	Electric		na	Cast i
BLANCO BCG95XFF **(D)**	79	85	72	Electric	✓	✓ **(K)**	Enam
FISHER & PAYKEL CG902WFC **(E)**	78	89	66	Electric	✓	✓ **(K)**	Cast i
KLEENMAID CH920XFF	76	77	74	Electric		na	Cast i
AEG 24968 G-m	72	74	70	Electric	✓	✓	Enam
DELONGHI DGH590WF **(F)**	71	73	68	Electric	✓	✓ **(K)**	Cast i
NO FLAME-FAILURE PROTECTION							
ELECTROLUX CHEF GH5933S **(G)**	78	83	72	Battery		na	Enam
WHIRLPOOL AKM498/IX **(H)**	75	90	60	Electric		na	Cast i

The **KLEENMAID** has a good burner layout with a deep partitioned hob to retain spills, and it cooked white sauce and stir-fry well. It also comes with a five-year warranty, but it's expensive and the controls are fairly small.

The **AEG** produced very good white sauce test and good stir-fry, has well-positioned burners and a three-year warranty. But it didn't do so well at cooking steaks and has a shallow spill tray.

The **DELONGHI** cooked stir-fry and steaks well, and has a good burner layout with a deep partitioned hob to retain spills. But it scored the lowest overall and for cooking performance, and the burners have an exposed skirt that makes cleaning difficult.



AUSTRAL PHOTOS

* *Prices are recommended or average retail, as provided by manufacturers in May/June 2005. You may get better prices by shopping around.*

na *Not applicable — the model doesn't have a fish burner to put it on.*

MEA *Major Electrical Appliances*

(A) *Also available as the GHL795W in white, $1059; the GHL95W in white with enamel trivets, $779; and the GHL95S in stainless steel with enamel trivets, $849. The latter two have no flame-failure protection.*

(B) *Also available as the NGT 915 HAU in stainless steel with enamel trivets for $1049.*

(C) *Also available as the KM 391 G with a ceramic surface for $2299, but it's wider (93 cm) so ease of use may be different.*

(D) *Also available as the BCG95X in stainless steel for $999; the BCG95W in white, $999; the BCG95WC in white with cast iron trivets for $1149; and the BCG93C in stainless steel with cast iron trivets, $1149. None has a flame-failure device.*

(E) *Also available as the CG902MJET with iridium finish, $1179.*

(F) *Also available as the DGH590W without the fish burner or flame-failure protection, $1279.*

(G) *Also available as the Simpson 72G957S in stainless steel, $619; and the Simpson 72G957W in white, $559.*

(H) *Also available as the 6AKM158IX/4 in stainless steel with enamel trivets, $749.*

(I) *A griddle plate isn't available for the cooktop, so we tested it with a cast iron griddle plate similar to the others in the test.*

(K) *A cast iron griddle plate is available as an optional extra for an additional cost.*

1 Overall score

Cooking performance: 50%

Ease of use: 50%

2 Cooking performance score

We used the following tests to assess the cooktops' cooking performance:

White sauce: a measure of how well the simmer burner maintains a low temperature.

Rice: a measure of how well the large burner turns down to low from a high temperature.

Stir-fried beef with vegetables: to assess the wok burner's ability to produce continuous high heat.

BBQ steak: to see how evenly and well the fish/BBQ burner cooks.

All cooking scores were weighted equally. Where a cooktop didn't have a fish/BBQ burner its score wasn't lowered for the lack of this feature.

3 Ease of use

Ease of use of the cooktop (includes layout): 40%

Cleaning: 40%

Controls: 20%

4 Features

For an explanation of flame-failure protection, see *Safety concerns*, page 43.

Auto ignition: cooktops with electronic ignition need to be connected to mains power supply, but they can be lit with a match in the event of a power failure.

Fish/BBQ burner: an elongated burner ideal for poaching fish or using with a griddle plate, see *Anyone for BBQ?*, page 42, for more.

Griddle plate: either supplied or available as an optional extra for an added cost. See *Anyone for BBQ?* for details.

5 Claimed burner ratings

The ratings are listed in the following order: small, medium, large, wok, fish burner (if provided).

Gas burners are rated in megajoules per hour (MJ/h) — the amount of energy they use on maximum heat.

ntrol sition	5 Claimed burner ratings (MJ/h)	Dimensions (W x D, cm)	Origin	Warranty (years)	Manufacturer / distributer	Price ($)*
le	5.1, 9.0, 12.7, 14.4, 10.3	86 x 51	Australia	2	Electrolux	1109
nt	3.84, 7.0, 12.2, 13.3, 12.0	86 x 51	Italy	2	Robert Bosch	1249
nt	3.85, 2 x 5.85, 10.35, 16.2	89 x 52	Germany	2	Miele	1899
le	4.0, 2 x 7.3, 15.0, 12.0	86 x 50	Italy	2	MEA – Blanco	1229
le	3.7, 2 x 7.9, 15, 10	92 x 53	New Zealand	2	Fisher & Paykel	949
nt	3.9, 2 x 6.6, 11.2, 14.5	91 x 51	Italy	5	Kleenmaid	1999
le	4.0, 4.9, 10.2, 11.0, 9.2	86 x 50	Italy	3	Andi-Co	1119
le	3.6, 2 x 6.3, 13, 10.3	86 x 50	Italy	2	DeLonghi	1299
le	5.1, 9.0, 2 x 12.7, 14.4	86 x 51	Australia	2	Electrolux	669
nt	3.8, 2 x 7.0, 12.2, 13.3	86 x 50	Italy	2	Whirlpool	899

OTHER FUELS

The cooktops tested can be used with LPG or natural gas (we used natural gas), but be sure to specify when buying because it will need to be fitted with different jets depending on the gas type.

EXTRA INFO

For a general cooktops buying guide, see the October 2004 issue of CHOICE or go to www.choiceextra.com.au and click on Oct 04 under 'Cooktops' in the index.

If you don't have access to the internet, or you don't have this back issue and you're a personal subscriber to CHOICE, phone 1800 069 552 and ask to be sent a copy.

Income protection loopholes

GENE ROSS

Depending on your circumstances it can be difficult to make a claim under an income protection insurance policy.

In 1997, concerned about being unable to support his family should something happen to him, Nick Laurie, a farmer from Gloucester in NSW insured himself with **MERCANTILE MUTUAL** (now **ING**) Income Protection insurance. His annual income from his occupation was declared as $36,000, and the agreed amount of coverage was for $2000 a month.

In 2002, Nick, who worked for the family company to run their 10,000 acre farm, fell from a quad-runner and sustained a shoulder injury. Suffering torn ligaments and other damage, he was unable to work for some months.

Nick's claim was, until recently, refused by **ING**, on the grounds that his taxable income for the 1997 tax year was only $1203. This is because Nick legitimately claimed the cost of company loans against his personal income. His actual income for that year of over $34,000 was drawn from repayments from an earlier loan made to the family company, which he received in lieu of wages, a fact that was confirmed for **ING** by Nick's accountant.

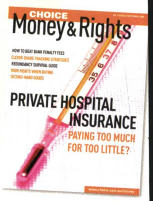
What Nick couldn't understand was that there was no mention in the policy of 'taxable income' being the basis of assessing the insured's income. Nick also affirms that when he signed up with the company, he wasn't made aware how his income was to be assessed. **ING** says it's standard industry practice to assess income this way.

"I spent six months in a sling and got nothing from my income protection policy until recently," says Nick. "I've lost any respect for insurance companies. They take your money, but when it comes to paying out, that's a different story."

Nick used an independent claims assessor to help negotiate with **ING** and after three years **ING** has finally agreed to pay the claim.

WANT MORE MONEY INFO?

CHOICE *Money & Rights* magazine is published six times a year and contains more information on money topics (and your consumer rights) than we could ever fit into CHOICE. To subscribe call 1800 069 552 toll-free or go to www.choice.com.au/magazines.



SUPER TIPS FOR WOMEN

Women generally have less in their super accounts than men. Reasons include the time women take out of the workforce as carers and the fact they have lower average earnings than men.

However, women can generally expect to live longer than men and may need more super to support a longer life.

Simple tips for boosting your super include:

- Find lost super. If you've changed your job, address or name and forgotten to tell your super fund, you probably have some unclaimed super.
- Consider consolidating all your super accounts into one. Multiple accounts mean multiple fees and charges.
- Top up your super savings if you can afford it and are happy not to access the funds until retirement. Tax concessions and government benefits make super an excellent way to save for retirement. See CHOICE *Money & Rights*, April/May 2004 or August/September 2004 for more information.
- Educate yourself about super. Check our super articles and tools at **www.choice.com.au/money**.
- Avoid illegal schemes to access your super early. In some cases consumers have been swindled out of some or all of their super by unscrupulous advisers offering them access to it. If you're under 55 you can only gain access to your super money in exceptional circumstances, such as if you're suffering severe financial hardship or you're permanently disabled. For more information go to www.apra.gov.au or call 1300 131 060.

NEW TO CHOICE ...
OTHER PUBLISHERS' TITLES

MONEYWORKS

A concise no-nonsense guide to managing your money better

Peter Cerexhe

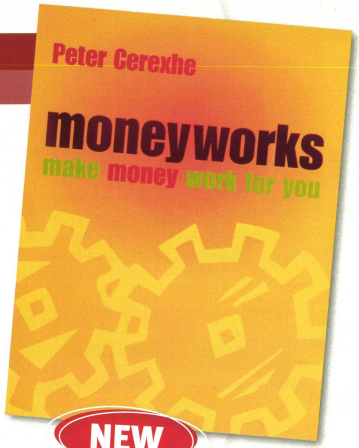
You don't have to make a lot of money to live well. You simply need to manage your money better and make it work for *you*.

Moneyworks covers all the basics, from credit cards to super, to show you how to take control of your money and make the most of it. Each chapter focuses on one topic and simply presents all you need to know about it: your options, the traps, the costs, how to know when you're in trouble, tax advantages, jargon and much more.

There's also information to help you make sense of the vast array of financial services and products on offer and work out what you need, as opposed to what you can do without, to get your money working for you.

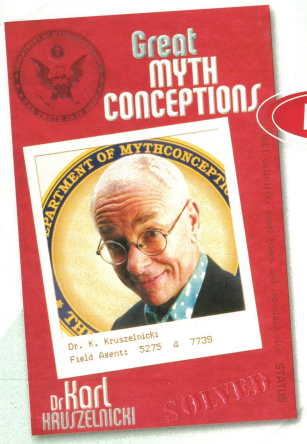
Peter Cerexhe was a solicitor specialising in property development and is now a full-time writer, author and editor in personal finance. He is the editor of *Consuming Interest* magazine and has written on finance for CHOICE.

$19.95 CODE: MWORKS



NEW

Buy 3 or more books and postage is FREE



NEW

GREAT MYTH CONCEPTIONS

Dr Karl Kruszelnicki

Dr Karl examines life's myths and absurdities.

Have you ever wondered ...

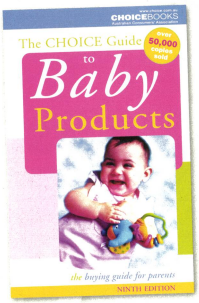
Is the toilet seat cleaner than the office desk? Did Man really land on the Moon? Is the Black Box black? Does a soul weigh 21 grams at the time of human death? Did Einstein fail school? Why isn't a quantum leap huge? Do we really use only 10% of our brain? Is there really a truth serum? Is a camel's hump full of water? *Great Myth Conceptions* tackles these questions and more.

Dr Karl Kruszelnicki is the Julius Sumner Miller Fellow at the University of Sydney and a well-known radio and TV personality.

$24.95 CODE: MYTH

CHOICEBOOKS

The essential CHOICE Guide collection

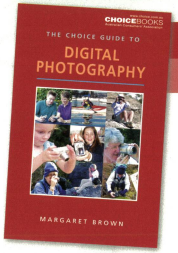


THE CHOICE GUIDE TO BABY PRODUCTS

9th edition

A no-nonsense guide to help parents buy the best and safest baby products.

$19.80 CODE: CBP9



THE CHOICE GUIDE TO DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY

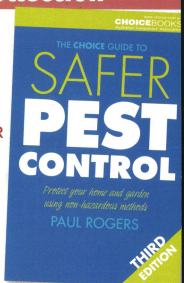
Everything you need to know about going digital.

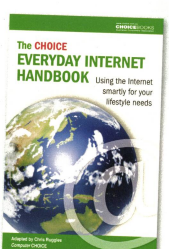
$29.25 CODE: DPCB

THE CHOICE GUIDE TO SAFER PEST CONTROL

Protect your home from common household and garden pests using non-toxic methods

$22.50 CODE: SPC3

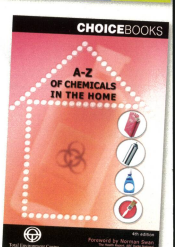




THE CHOICE EVERYDAY INTERNET HANDBOOK

Learn how to use the internet effectively in your everyday life.

$27.00 CODE: EICB



A–Z OF CHEMICALS IN THE HOME

All you need to know about the risks and toxicity of common chemicals in the home.

$19.80 CODE: AZC4

All CHOICE Books are cheaper here than normal retail

Order Form

I enclose ❑ cheque ❑ money order (payable to the Australian Consumers' Association)

or I wish to pay by: ❑ Bankcard ❑ Mastercard ❑ Visa ❑ Amex ❑ Diners Club Expiry ___ / ___

Card number

Name on card

Signature

Mr/Ms/Mrs/Miss

Address

Postcode

Phone (day) Subscriber no.

Please allow two to three weeks for delivery. If any order can't be filled for a substantial length of time, we'll let you know and give you the option of cancellation.

AUSTRALIAN CONSUMERS' ASSOCIATION ABN 35 799 246 568 ACN 000 281 925

Code	Title	Qty	Item price	Total price

Postage and handling (waived if buying 3 or more books) $6.00

Total

Send your payment to: Australian Consumers' Association, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204 • Phone (02) 9577 3399 • Fax (02) 9577 3355 • Order online at www.choice.com.au.

Money-back guarantee: If you're not completely satisfied with your purchase, return book(s) within 30 days for a full refund of the purchase price.

THIS FORM MAY BE USED AS A TAX INVOICE. CB/0508

recalls&bans

Nowadays there are so many product recalls we may not be able to print all of them in CHOICE. For comprehensive recall information go to the Federal Treasury website: www.recalls.gov.au. If you don't have web access, call the Consumer Safety Unit on (02) 6263 2747.

Companies often rent 1800 numbers for a couple of months after a recall is announced. If the number given is no longer operating, phone the manufacturer or retailer direct.

STROLLER: Mountain Buggy has recalled some 2005 **Urban single strollers** and 2005 **Urban double strollers**. See *Choice Cuts*, page 5, for more information.

FOOD: The Geographe Cheese Company has recalled **Petit Fromage**, 100 g tub, best-before date 1 June 05, distributed in WA.
The problem: It may be contaminated with *E. coli*.
What to do: Don't eat it. Contact your GP if you have any health concerns. Check your freezer for any affected product and return it to the place of purchase for a refund. For more information call (08) 9751 1865.

FOOD: Action Supermarkets has recalled **BBQ thin sausages** and **Beef BBQ sausages**, various sizes, with use-by dates between 14/02/2005 and 20/05/2005, sold in Action Supermarkets in northern NSW and Queensland.
The problem: They may contain gluten, which hasn't been declared as gluten on the packaging.
What to do: Don't eat them if you have a gluten intolerance. Check your freezer for any affected product and return them to the place of purchase for a refund. For more information call (03) 8805 5008.

FOOD: Unilever has recalled **Copha** (vegetable cooking shortening), 250 g in a white wrapper, best-before dates 04 05 06, 05 05 06 and 06 05 06.
The problem: Some packs may contain metal filings.
What to do: Don't use it. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund, or call 1800 801 885 for more information.

FOOD: Aristocrat Gourmet Foods has recalled **Aristocrat & Melton Pork Pies**, 125 g, 150 g, 400 g, 450 g and 650 g, wrapped and unwrapped, all use-by dates between 24 May 2005 and 1 June 2005, and distributed in WA.
The problem: They may be contaminated with *E. coli*.
What to do: Don't eat them. Check your freezer for any affected product and return them to the place of purchase for a refund. Contact your GP if you have any health concerns. For more information call (08) 9470 4347.

FOOD: Bi-Lo Supermarkets has recalled **Bi-Lo Shredded Lite Tasty cheese**, 500 g plastic packet, best-before date 28/OCT/05 and sold in NSW, Northern Territory, Queensland, SA and Victoria.
The problem: Some packets have been found to contain plastic fragments.
What to do: Don't eat it. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund, or call 1800 061 562 for more information.

WATER: Yuen's Market Trading Company has recalled **Pun Chun Lye Water**, 500 mL glass bottle, all best-before dates, and distributed in Asian retail outlets in the Brisbane area.
The problem: The water is highly alkaline, and shouldn't be consumed.
What to do: Don't drink it, and avoid contact with the eyes and skin. If the product is ingested, contact your GP or the Poisons Information Centre immediately. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund, or for more information call (07) 3277 4866.

FOOD: Coles and **Bi-Lo** have recalled **Savings Choc Coated Ice Cream** and **Bi-Lo Choc Coated Ice Cream**, both 10 packs, 875 mL. The Bi-Lo ice creams have use-by dates of 01 Feb 2007, 17 Mar 2007 and 18 Mar 2007 and the Savings ice creams have a use-by date of 09 Aug 2006.
The problem: They may contain fragments of black plastic.
What to do: Don't eat them. Return them to the place of purchase for a refund, or for more information call 1800 061 562.

CHILDREN'S ROBES: Spotlight Stores has recalled **Babies Inc luxury Velour Baby Robe** in ivory, blue or pink; **Babies First Bath Robe Gift Set** in white, pink or blue; and **Mode Terry Bath Robe**, children's sizes only, in cloud or white. All robes were sold in Spotlight stores from August 2004 to June 2005.
The problem: The robes don't comply with labelling requirements of the Australian standard, and don't contain a warning statement referring to "Children's nightwear and limited daywear having reduced fire hazard".
What to do: Return them to your nearest Spotlight store for a refund.

TOY: Yatsal Distributors has recalled **Happy Childhood plastic pull along plane with shapes**, sold in discount variety stores in NSW between March 2004 and March 2005 with barcode number 9315892117042.
The problem: The toy may release small parts that may pose a choking risk to young children.
What to do: Remove it from the reach of children. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund, or call (02) 9755 3055 for more information.

TOY: Yatsal Distributors has recalled a **Toy Saxaphone** [*sic*].
The problem: The toy may release small parts that may pose a choking risk to young children.
What to do: Remove it from the reach of children. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund, or call (02) 9755 3055 for more information.

TOY: Judius has recalled the **String Along Farm**.
The problem: The black smoke stack on the tractor figure hasn't been properly secured and may come away from the main body of the tractor, posing a choking hazard to young children.
What to do: Return it to Judius Pty Ltd, Reply Paid 316, Rosebery NSW 1445 and request a refund.

DOLL: Dorcy Irwin Pacific has recalled **Strawberry Shortcake 18 cm Berry Friends Plush Angel Cake doll**.
The problem: The rose on the Angel Cake doll's hat may detach and pose a choking hazard to young children.
What to do: Return it to the place of purchase for a refund.

FUEL CAN: Willow Ware has recalled **Willow 10 L fuel cans**.
The problem: Some cans may be faulty, resulting in the contents of the can leaking from the cap.
What to do: Stop using it. Call 1800 333 165 to make arrangements for a replacement.

ESPRESSO MACHINE: Time Inc. has recalled **Inovar Cappucino machine**, model JA 502.
The problem: Steam pressure may build up beyond acceptable levels.
What to do: Stop using it. Call 1300 720 600 for more information.

AC ADAPTOR: Dick Smith has recalled **Digitor AC Adaptors**.
The problem: Some adaptors have a plastic moulding defect which can allow the casing to separate.
What to do: Stop using it. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund, or to any Dick Smith Electronics, Dick Smith PowerHouse or Tandy store.

LAMP/FAIRY LIGHTS: Fusion Blue has recalled **Chinese porcelain lamps** and **fairy lights**, distributed in WA.
The problem: The wiring and fittings don't meet electrical safety standards.
What to do: Return them to the place of purchase for a refund or repair.

MOTORCYCLE: Yamaha has recalled **Yamaha** FJR1300A 2004 – 2005 models.
The problem: There is an incorrect approval number stamped on the compliance plate.
What to do: Affected owners will be notified by mail.

CAR: Toyota has recalled **Toyota Land Cruiser Prado**, model years from 22 May 2001 to 7 August 2002, and with the following model codes: RZJ95 VDS BM99J# VIS 00047327 – 00060247; VZJ95 VDS BN95J# and BN99J# VIS 00086146 – 00103446 and KZJ95 VDS BY99J# VIS 00165768 – 00173429.
The problem: The front suspension lower ball joint may have been scratched, which may cause excessive wear of the ball joint, and eventually possible loss of steering control.
What to do: Owners will be contacted by letter, or for more information contact your nearest Toyota dealer.

CAR: Ford has recalled **JH Econovan vehicles**, built from March 2004 to February 2005, VIN range JCOAAASGMD4A41235 to JCOAAASHMD4Y42075, and JCOAAASGME4A41229 to JCOAAASGME4Y42074.
The problem: The park brake bracket within the rear brake assembly may crack.
What to do: Owners will be contacted by letter, or for more information contact your local dealer or Ford on 133 673.

aboutchoice

The Australian Consumers' Association is a non-profit, non-party-political organisation, established in 1959 to provide consumers with information and advice on goods, services, health and personal finances, and to help maintain and enhance their quality of life. It's a Council member of Consumers International.

100% independent. Our income is derived solely from the sale of CHOICE and our other publications and products. All the products we subject to full testing are bought by us in the marketplace; sometimes to get the latest model we may buy directly from a manufacturer where we can select a random sample. We never accept gifts from manufacturers or retailers; we sometimes borrow samples, especially of new products, for quick reviews. We are not beholden to any commercial, government or union interests, and we don't accept advertising.

We test and rate products and services. Our ratings are usually based on quality without regard to price, and are derived from lab tests, expert judgments and reader surveys. If a product is high in quality and relatively low in price, we deem it a Best Buy. A rating applies only to the brand and model tested, not to other models sold under the same brand name, unless so noted.

Representing your interests. We lobby and campaign on behalf of consumers to promote their rights, to influence government policy, and to ensure consumer issues have a high profile in the public arena.

'No commercial use' policy. Our ratings and reports may not be used in advertising or for any other commercial purpose. ACA will take all steps to prevent commercial use of its materials, its name, and the name of CHOICE or its other publications and products. Please report any apparent violation to the Consumers' Association, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204; phone (02) 9577 3399; fax (02) 9577 3355; email ausconsumer@choice.com.au.

Permissions. Reproduction of CHOICE, CHOICE Books and other CHOICE publications, in whole or in part, is forbidden without prior written permission (and is never permitted for commercial purposes). Address requests to CHOICE Consumer Services at the address below.

Your privacy. We're committed to protecting your privacy, and abide by Australia's National Privacy Principles. We never sell or give our mailing lists to other organisations. If you'd like to read our privacy policy, it's on our website or we can send you a copy.

All literary and artistic works and compilations of information are the subject of Australian and international copyright © Australian Consumers' Association 2005. CHOICE™ is a trademark of the Australian Consumers' Association. All rights reserved.

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER: Peter Kell. **Executive assistant:** Georgina Saltos. **DEPUTY CEO:** Norm Crothers. **Office administrator:** Sylvia Bone. **CHOICE: Editor** Jane Mackenzie. **Acting editor** Luisa Bustos. **Writers/journalists this issue** Sharon Aris, Birgitt Baader, Chris Barnes, Karina Bray, Rachel Clemons, Kim Laurie, Louise McCabe, Uta Mhm, David Oakenfull, Martha Psiroukis, Chris Ruggles, Joel Thompson.
CONTENT GENERATION: Chris Barnes, Zara Baxter, Rachel Clemons, Michael Hohl, Liz Munn, David Oakenfull, Martha Psiroukis, Chris Ruggles.
CHOICE ONLINE: Manager Linda Magee. Chris Ruggles, Glenn Mason, Amira Meyer.
RESEARCH AND TEST CENTRE: Manager John Ashes. **Laboratory: Manager** Klaus Neuscheler. Jo Bektash, Antonio Bonacruz, Brian Champion, Geoff Day, Peter Horvath, Mohamed Jawahir, Fiona Mair, Neill Patterson, Benjamin Rossetto, Matthew Steen, Petr Valouch. **Buying** Dorothy Kreale, Kate Murdoch. **Research** Christine Shaday, Joe Sydney. **Test Research** John Ashes.
MARKETING AND COMMUNITY: General Manager Mary Harris. **Research** Markus Powling, Kai-lin Sze. **Marketing** Kellie Thomson, Zac Godkin. **Consumer Services: Manager** Bill Stuart. Lizzie Ball, Rachel Green, Silvana Ristevska, Ailin Sun, Alice Wood.
QUALITY AND IT SYSTEMS: General Manager Barbara Manchester. **Quality control: Manager** Pam Gardiner. **Verifiers** Sharon Caudoro, Frank Donaghy, Corinna Horrigan, Elizabeth Hurtt, Lawson Lobb, Scott O'Keefe, Karen Palmer. **IT: Manager** Stephen Macdonald. Charles Ly. **Subscriptions: Manager** Bill Stuart. **Supervisor** Nootaya Hwang. **Co-ordinator** Thelma Bracken. Lynda-Maree Morgan, Fiona Pollard.
POLICY AND CAMPAIGNS: General manager Gordon Renouf. **Media manager** Lisa Tait. **Policy** Charles Britton, Clare Hughes.
PRODUCTION: Manager Darrell Sly. **Art director** Michelle Havenstein. **Senior designer** Jacqui Fry. **Photographer** Gene Ross.
FINANCE AND PROPERTY: Manager Alan Johnston. **Accounts** Jeanette Dwyer, Kang Zhu Ge, Sera Raicama. **Administration** Jeanette Porter. **Library** Jane Wholohan. **Records management** Shirley Colless.

Marketing statistics by Gfk Marketing Services.
Financial information supplied by Cannex.
Services information supplied by ASSIRT Research.

The Australian Consumers' Association is a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee. ACN 000 281 925. ABN 35 799 246 568.
Registered office 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204, Australia.

UPGRADE TO
choice.com.au

Personal CHOICE magazine subscribers can join choice.com.au for just $9.50 per quarter (normally $14.95)

Get instant access to:

- Interactive compare-a-product tools
- Hundreds of product and service reports
- New and used car databases
- Food and health quizzes
- Scams, campaigns and polls

JOIN NOW!

Go to
www.choiceextra.com.au
and follow the prompts

index

HOW TO USE THIS INDEX
Bold type indicates a test, survey or trial report, normal type indicates other articles.
* indicates an update of a previous report, additions or corrections to reports, small follow-up items, letters or recalls. For space reasons, the index generally doesn't include Choice Cuts and other small pieces.

Air conditioners, split-system, including inverters **Oct**
Airline survey, domestic **Jun**
Arthritis treatments **Aug**

Barbecues, gas, trolley/portable **Dec**
Batteries, rechargeable, AA **Mar**
Biscuits, shortbread **Jul**
Blood pressure monitors **May**
Bottled water **Jul**
Bra fitting services **Jul**
Breakfast cereals **Mar**
Breakfasts, quick **Sep**
Butter and spreads **Jan/Feb**

Camcorders, digital **Jan/Feb**
Cameras
digital **Oct**, Dec*, **Apr**, Jun*
paper costs, printing photos **Oct**
printer docks **Jun**
Cars
ANCAP crash tests **Oct, Jul**
crash repair costs Jun
hybrid petrol/electric cars Apr
key replacement costs Sep
lemon laws Sep
reader reviews Mar, Apr
used car safety Dec
waterless car cleaners **Mar**
Cashew nuts **Dec**
Cereals, breakfast **Mar**
Champagne and sparkling wine **Dec**
Child/baby concerns
cot, Stokke **Jun**, Jul*
cots **Jan/Feb**
dishwater detergent danger Jul
lunches and snacks **Jan/Feb**
strollers, jogger **Jun,** Aug*
tipping stove Nov, Jan/Feb*
toppling TVs Oct, Mar*
Cleaners
car, waterless **Mar**
laundry detergents **May,** Jul*
mitts **Apr**
multipurpose **Oct**
steam **Apr**
Clothes dryers **Apr**, Jun*
Cockroach killers **Dec**
Coffee
chains (coffee and cakes) **May**
espresso machines, auto **Aug**
Convection heaters **Jun**
Cooktops
buying guide Oct
gas **Aug**
Cordless drills, cheap **Apr**
Cordless phones **Apr**
Cots
Stokke **Jun**, Jul*
test **Jan/Feb**

Detergents, laundry **May,** Jul*
Digital camcorders **Jan/Feb**
Digital cameras **Oct**, Dec*, **Apr**, Jun*
Dishwasher detergent danger Jul
Dishwashers **Jan/Feb, Jul**
Doors, security screen Mar
Drills, cheap cordless **Apr**
Dryers, clothes **Apr**, Jun*
Duty-free shopping Aug
DVD recorders **Aug**

Eggs **Sep**
Electric shavers **Nov**, Jan/Feb*
Electric toothbrushes **Sep**
Electricity, costs and supply Mar
Energy labelling Sep
Espresso machines, auto **Aug**

Flooring guide, timber Dec
Food
biscuits, shortbread **Jul**
breakfast cereals **Mar**
breakfasts, quick **Sep**
butter and spreads **Jan/Feb**
children's lunches and snacks **Jan/Feb**
coffee shop chains **May**
eggs **Sep**
folate Nov
honey **May**
juice bars Dec
labelling, marketing Jul
labelling, quality descriptors Nov
low-carb varieties Aug
nuts, cashews and mixed **Dec**
organic processed foods Oct
spaghetti **Jun**
spreads and butter **Jan/Feb**
storage, disposable **Jan/Feb**
trans fat **Apr**
water, bottled **Jul**
Folate, eating enough Nov
Fridges, energy-efficient, mixed sizes **Nov, May**, Jun*
Frypans, non-stick **Nov**

Gas cooktops **Aug**
Glamour photography Apr
Glucosamine **Aug**
Greywater, reusing Nov, Mar*

Hair straighteners **Aug**
Health
arthritis treatments **Aug**
blood pressure monitors **May**
glucosamine **Aug**
hospital insurance **Sep**
magnet therapy Sep
multivitamins Jun
pedometers **Oct**, Dec*
St John's wort May
Heaters
convection, electric **Jun**
outdoor, gas **Mar**, Jun*
Home theatre systems **Dec**
Honey **May**
Hospital insurance **Sep,** May*
Hybrid (petrol/electric) cars Apr

Index, four-year Jun
Indoor paint **Dec**
Insurance
hospital **Sep,** May*
travel **Dec**
Internet, wireless Nov

Jogger strollers **Jun, Aug***
Juice bars Dec

Labelling
energy Sep
food Nov, Jul
Ladders **Aug**
Laundry detergents **May,** Jul*
Lawnmowers, battery and electric **Nov**
Lemon laws (cars) Sep
Low-carb foods Aug

Magnet therapy Sep
Mattresses, buying guide Oct
Microwaves **Jul**
Mitts, cleaning **Apr**
Mixed nuts **Dec**
Mobile phones, GSM **Jan/Feb, Jun,** Aug*
Multifunction printers **May**
Multipurpose cleaners **Oct**
Multivitamins Jun

Non-stick frypans **Nov**
Nuts, cashews and mixed **Dec**

Organic processed foods Oct
Osteoarthritis treatments **Aug**
Outdoor gas heaters **Mar**
Ovens, buying guide Jul

Paint, indoor **Dec**
Paper costs, printing photos **Oct**
Pay TV Mar
Pedometers **Oct**, Dec*
Pet care services Aug
Pharmacies, advice given **Sep,** May*
Phones
cordless **Apr**
mobile — see Mobile phones
phoning home from overseas Sep, Dec*
VoIP calls Apr
Photography, glamour Apr
Pool fences **Sep**
Printer docks for digital cameras **Jun**
Printers, multifunction **May**

Rainwater tanks Nov, Mar*
Rangehoods **Jun**
Rechargeable batteries, AA **Mar**
Refrigerators — see Fridges
Rice cookers **Mar**

Security screen doors Mar
Shavers, electric **Nov**, Jan/Feb*
Shortbread biscuits **Jul**
Snacks for children **Jan/Feb**
Spaghetti **Jun**
Sparkling wine and champagne **Dec**
Spreads and butter **Jan/Feb**
St John's wort May
Steam cleaners **Apr**
Storage, food, disposable **Jan/Feb**
Stove, tipping Nov, Jan/Feb*
Strollers, jogger **Jun,** Aug*

Telephones — see Phones
Television
51 cm **May**
76 cm, widescreen **Oct,** Jan/Feb*
pay TV Mar
toppling TVs Oct, Mar*
Timber flooring guide Dec
Toothbrushes, electric **Sep**
Toothpaste, whitening **Jan/Feb**
Trans fat **Apr**
Travel insurance **Dec**

Vacuum cleaners **Jul**
Video equipment, home theatre systems **Dec**
VoIP phone calls **Apr**

Washer-dryers **Mar,** Apr*
Washing machines **Sep,** Oct*, Jan/Feb*
Washing powder **May**
Water
bottled **Jul**
greywater, reusing Nov, Mar*
rainwater tanks Nov, Mar*
Waterless car cleaners **Mar**
Whitening toothpaste **Jan/Feb**
Wine, sparkling and champagne **Dec**
Wireless internet Nov

COUNCIL MEMBERS

The **Australian Consumers' Association** is governed by an honorary council elected by the voting members. (For information about voting membership, call (02) 9577 3399.) Members of the council give their time without reimbursement, and are not engaged as principals in industry, advertising or sales.

COUNCIL: Chair: Chris Field. **Deputy Chair:** Debra Harker. **Members:** Allan Barton, Robin Brown, Cynthia Cliff, Dr Ken Harvey, Dianne Hill, Jenni Mack, Phil Marchionni, Joan Staples, John T D Wood.

hardword

8 VIBRANT COLOURS TO CHOOSE FROM
ZEN
CREATIVE
ONLY $129
CREATIVE
MP3/WMA PLAYER
• 128MB memory • AM tuner • Voice/FM recording • Directly record music
• Store data files such as photos and presentations • Available in Pink, Black, Apple & Dark Blue

Colour bind

As Glenn Hilling points out, 'At least it's an advance on Henry Ford's Model T in "any colour — so long as it's black"!'

OK, so we see a lot of these tags for amazing sales where you save nothing. The disturbing thing about this one is that it's handwritten — so it can't be blamed on a mindless machine...

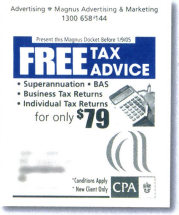
Kramat
TOTALLY
Washable
Care Instructions
- Remove cover and hand wash using a mild detergent or machine wash in cold water on delicate cycle
- Do not use bleach, mix with other washing or tumble dry
- Shape and dry in shade immediately after washing
- Store out of direct sunlight high temperature and humidity
- Do not wash lined insert [WASH COVER ONLY]
- For indoor use only

Hogwash

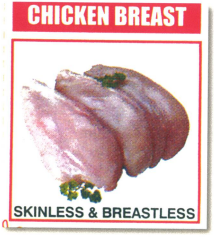
This "totally washable" dog bed wasn't as totally washable as our reader had hoped.

No such thing as a free lunch

If "free" tax advice costs $79, would you trust these people with your tax return?



With all the hype associated with food marketing these days, it's nice to see Coles getting back to basics with these oranges.



What's left, then?

Skinless *and* breastless chicken breasts?

How about a little help?

The prize for the best entry goes to S Hilling. Thanks to A McCahon, G and C Stark, G Galagher, N Vickers, B McLeod, G and S Hilllling and P Vorrasi for their contributions to this month's *Hard Word*. Please keep them coming.

If you have any examples you think deserve to be on this page, send them to *The Hard Word*, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204. Please don't email us your entries — we need the originals.